

Sermon Notes – March 23, 2025
The Holy Gospel of St. Luke 13: 1-9
Peace Lutheran Church
“Cut It Out or Cut It Down”

In today's gospel reading, Jesus explains another use God has for suffering (without claiming that He causes it, or that it is always a result of our actions). Referencing a violent act of government repression and a simple if terrible accident, Jesus denies that the victims were particularly guilty. Luke 13: 3 cannot mean that if His hearers repent, they will not die - everyone, after all, dies. Instead, the emphasis is on “as they were” (13: 3, 5) - that is, without preparation and without repentance. God uses suffering to break through our illusions of immortality, with a reminder that we do not have unlimited time to order our lives properly. The message here is the same one Paul was teaching in 2 Corinthians 5: 20-6: 10, read on Ash Wednesday. Again, God doesn't send disaster into other people's lives to warn us, but He is not too proud to take advantage of those circumstances to cause us to grow. The parable, then, reaffirms the point. The fig tree is not only wasting space but sucking up nutrients a more productive tree could use. To give it a last chance to become its best self, the gardener surrounds it with manure. (As one who grew up with farming, I can attest that standing in manure is of itself an experience of suffering.) But both the gardener and the landowner promise it only one more year to change.

The first reading (reminiscent of Wisdom's invitations in Proverbs) is a call to turn from fruitlessness and unfaithfulness to the joys of life in harmony with God. He is not too proud to threaten us, if that would serve to catch our attention and bring us around (as in the gospel reading); and He is more than willing to invite us winsomely, if that will work (as in Isaiah). Those who say that God is harsh and threatening in the Old Testament, and loving and kind in the New Testament, have never really read either one. “Seek the Lord” (Isa. 55: 6) seems to have begun as a technical term for sleeping in the temple in hopes of receiving a vision; no doubt its meaning expanded to a more general openness to receiving the Word of the Lord.

The second reading makes it even clearer that God will use the suffering of others to disrupt our complacency and open us up to His divine promises. But it is not only that Paul is using the example of the Israelites in the desert as a warning in general. This is an example of typological exegesis (Biblical interpretations that view Old Testament persons or events as being related to the revelations of Christ in the New Testament) , which affirms that along with its fundamental, original meaning, a story from scripture may serve as a fore-echo of other stories, or even our own. Thus, the crossing of the Red Sea is a type of baptism. Typology, then, warns that if the Israelites were subject to corrective punishment after that crossing, we are not immune to the same treatment after our baptism.