

Redeem/Luke 13:1-9

Preached March 20, 2022/See I Am Doing a New Thing sermon series

Good morning, friends. Welcome to worship and welcome to week four of our Lenten sermon series See I Am Doing a New Thing. We started this series on Ash Wednesday where we focused on the theme of return. We talked about returning to our spiritual disciplines and roots that ground us in our faith and our relationship with God. The first Sunday of Lent we focused on the theme of revive, when Gail preached about the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. And last Sunday, our theme was rebuild and we focused on the story from Luke's gospel about Jesus envisioning himself as a mother hen who longed to gather her chicks under her wings and who continues to call them home.

This morning is the third Sunday in Lent, and our theme this week is redeem. Our scripture passage comes from the beginning of the thirteenth chapter of the gospel according to Luke. And the passage focuses on two common Lenten themes: suffering and repentance. And that might seem like an odd combination, but there's a really interesting link between the two in this passage. And that link is the concept of time. I don't know about you, but one of the strangest things that happened to me during the pandemic was the way that time just felt different, especially at the beginning of covid during quarantine. Did this happen to anyone else? When lots of people stayed home for long stretches of time and we worked and went to school from home, it sort of felt like I lost the ability to keep track of time like I used to. As you might have guessed by now, I am a very scheduled person. As I've said before in this pulpit, I keep an electronic calendar (two of them, actually) and a paper planner and I live by those. They keep the trains running on time in my life. But when life changed in March of 2020 and I no longer needed to leave my house to go to classes at Perkins or meetings or take Jack to school, I could barely remember what day it was. It sometimes felt like entire days would pass in a blur and I

couldn't remember a thing I had actually done. I remember seeing a funny quote on Facebook that some of you may have seen. The quote said, "I always thought that if I had more time on my hands, I could finally get my house clean. As it turns out, that was not the problem."

It raises a really good question that actually is the crux of today's scripture passage. The question is: how much time do you have? This passage basically has two very short stories and one parable. We start this reading with two reports of things that had recently happened. It says that "some present" came to tell Jesus about an event. We don't know who the folks are who tell him about it, nor do we know much about the events they're describing. The first story that is posed to Jesus tells him about some Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. We don't have historical information about this specific event, so it's hard to say exactly what happened that led to it. Similarly, Jesus talks about eighteen people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them. Biblical commentators have different theories about where the tower of Siloam was -- several think it was probably part of the city wall of Jerusalem near the pool of Siloam -- but we still don't really have any information about the event itself.

What we do know is that these two events involved suffering. And Jesus talks about both stories in similar ways. When he's asked about the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices, he doesn't directly address what happened. Instead, he asks whether they think the Galileans were worse sinners because they suffered this fate. And he answers the question for them and says no, they weren't. And he tells them to repent, or they will perish just like the Galileans did. With the second story, Jesus asks whether the eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them were worse offenders than others who were living in Jerusalem. And again, he answers the question no, but tells them that unless they repent, they will perish just like the people in the story did.

Jesus' response to these two events is telling because he really doesn't seem at all interested in having a discussion about what theologians call theodicy, which is the theological concept about whether or not God causes suffering and why a good, loving God allows suffering. That seems to be what these stories are about, and that's not terribly surprising, because people ask the same sorts of questions today. And Jesus pretty definitively says that in both stories, the people who suffered weren't any worse sinners than anyone else. But rather than discussing that at length, Jesus appears to be more interested in focusing on the responsibility his disciples have for their own lives. He urges them to repent.

And then we get to the parable of the barren fig tree. This is a significant shift in this passage. In this parable, a landowner and a gardener have a discussion about an unproductive fig tree. The landowner appears to have given up on the tree. He says he's been looking for fruit on the fig tree for three years and still hasn't found any, so he instructs the gardener to cut it down. Fig trees usually bear fruit once or twice a year. After three years with no figs, the tree is taking up valuable space. For what it's worth, the gardener's response is much nicer than my natural instinct might have been. If I had been the gardener in this story, I would be inclined to respond, "You've been looking for figs for three *years* and you're just now pointing this out to me?" Instead, the gardener suggests far less drastic measures. He says they should leave it alone for one more year, so the gardener can continue to work on it. He can dig around and fertilize it and see what happens. If it bears fruit, great. If not, then they can cut it down. The unproductive fig tree is being given a gift – the gift of time. The tree will get more time to bear fruit. More time to change. More time to grow. A lot of things can change if you give them one more year.

There were a lot of things in my life that prompted me to follow my call into ordained ministry, but I think one of the biggest was the funerals. I had felt God calling me into ministry

since high school, and over the years, I had plenty of reasons why I didn't think that would work for me. Some of them made good sense – after spending years and a lot of money getting a law degree, it's hard to find yourself in a busy and successful law practice and just walk away from it. I was also a mom, and it was hard to imagine making such a big change in my life while I was a parent, and especially when I was a single parent. And not to put too fine a point on it, but I really wasn't getting any younger (I'm still not, in case you're wondering). And making big life changes seems much easier when you're in your 20s than it does when you're in your 40s. So, I didn't really need reasons to run away from God's call. I had plenty of those and plenty of experience avoiding it. But my mother's funeral in 2016 was a real wakeup call for me in a lot of ways. And one of them was reckoning with time. Because the reality is that we only get so much time in our lives, and we don't really know how long it's going to be. And when we have these moments, which often happen at funerals, but can happen around other times, as well, it really makes you think about mortality. It's often a time when people stop and assess where their lives are going and what their priorities really are. As the poet Mary Oliver famously said, "What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" And I finally came to the conclusion that I didn't want to attend funerals anymore unless I was in a position to officiate those funerals. I knew deep inside me that I was called to ministry and at some point I realized that I kept putting it off, assuming I would always have more time. But we never know how much time we really have. And I finally got to the point where I was no longer willing to wait to start the next phase of my life. I finally thought, you know, I don't know when this other lifetime will be that I think I'm finally going to be a pastor, but if I really want to do it, I'd probably better start now.

I think this is part of the through line of these stories and this parable. They seem kind of randomly thrown together, but as with everything in scripture, I don't think that they are. At the

end of the day, I think the point in all of this in this season of Lent is that we are called to examine our consciences, repent, and turn around, to turn back to God. And the point in the first two stories today is how are we doing that? How are we spending our one wild and precious life? Are we spending it questioning God and wondering where God is all the time? Or are we spending it examining ourselves and telling the truth about who we are? We are surrounded by suffering these days – all we have to do is take a look at the news about the war in the Ukraine to see obvious examples of human suffering. And as long as human suffering exists, we may never be able to fully explain it in ways that answer all our questions and comfort us. But we can spend the time we have doing what’s ours to do. There’s no time left for the folks in today’s stories in the gospel. But there’s still time for us. God continues to give us grace; grace comes in many different forms. Sometimes it comes in the form of a sacrament here in worship. Sometimes it comes through a beautiful, loving relationship. And sometimes it comes in the form of time.

During this Lenten season, we can really live into today’s scripture passage through prayer and self-examination. Lent calls us in many different ways, and one thing we can do in this season is to see each day and our lives as a gift. We can take this time to be thankful for what we have and to look at how we can have meaningful lives. I know we all face challenges and difficulties in our lives, but what are truly thankful for? When I read Will Willimon’s reflections on today’s scripture passage, he made a great point. He said that over the years as he’s observed people in his role as a pastor, he’s seen people go through really difficult illnesses and then make it through with the help of their healthcare providers and loving families and friends. And when they return to health, they don’t seem to spend a lot of time wondering, “Why did this happen to me?” or “What did I do to deserve this?” Instead, they see their time of

restored health as a gift, a wonderful opportunity to start over, to do things they had put off doing before. They appreciated more than ever the gift of time.

As Sharron Blezard said in an article on this passage, if we're merely existing, longing for the past, too worn down to invest the energy, creativity, and passion in sharing the Good News of Jesus with a broken and hurting world, what are we doing? How are we any different from the rest of the world? We the Body of Christ, exist to be sent out into the world. We are called to be good stewards of the gifts God has given us, including our time, our talent, and our resources. We're called to be fruitful to the best of our abilities. We don't want to waste the soil forever. Yes, we will have seasons when we're less fruitful in our ministry and probably in the rest of our lives too. Even plants have seasons where they replenish themselves – rest is part of who we are.

But when we're ready, when we're in our fruitful season, what will we do with our one wild and precious life? How will we spend the time we have? Are we willing to go all in and do the hard work of being pruned, shaped, formed, and nurtured for new life? Are we willing to risk that work for a life that looks a lot different from the way things have been? I don't know what everyone's gifts are, and I can't tell you exactly what you're supposed to do every day. But what I can tell you is don't waste the soil. Don't wait three years to finally ask why your life isn't bearing the fruit you know it can. Don't keep putting things off and thinking you have all the time in the world. None of us knows how much time we have. So don't waste it. There is a great big world out there that needs God's love now as much as ever. As you leave here go in peace. And bloom in the image of Christ.