

Lent 3

Isaiah 55.1-9; Luke 13.1-9

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

These words, this declaration, this demanding invitation...generous and gracious invitation...is so beautiful, so compelling, such Good News. In our consumerist, capitalist, militaristic world, everything has a price. “Buy this and you’ll be happy,” the ads tell us. “Buy that and your future health and well-being will be taken care of,” drug and insurance companies assure us. “Join the army and be fulfilled. We’ll pick up the tab.” Who can say no?

The billboards and commercials sound a lot like Isaiah, don’t they? We want this to be true. We want the assurance that our future is guaranteed. Not just our future, but our well-being and security in the future. We *want* to eat what is good. We *long* to delight in rich food. And we think that eating good, rich food should be easy, carefree, without struggle, without pain. That it should be free. Priceless.

We seem to be blind to the prices we pay to keep this illusion in place. We are willing to live under crushing debt—buying homes, vacations, *stuff*—all for the illusion that life should be easy, painless, secure. We offer our children to the military, willingly sacrificing them for the lie that in order to have peace, we must kill. And when the curtain is pulled back and the illusions of security and are exposed, the response of many is anger, lashing out at those who would dismantle the systems that have privileged them while oppressing others.

There is a script that has been deforming us from the beginning. The script says that the good life is about transactions, and sacrifice. The script says that to live in a free country we must sacrifice our sons and daughters to the gods of war. The script says that in order to live

the good life, we must bow down at the altar of money and capitalism. And that if we want to feast on wine and rich food, the poor and marginalized need to be sacrificed to the gods of power, privilege, and comfort.

This script has been written into us, into our nation, into the church. We have been formed by a theology that says that God is a transactional God, rewarding those who are righteous, those who do good. And punishing sinners, those who do bad. Good people are rewarded with a banquet of wine and milk and rich food. It's free to them...because they're good and God is pleased with them. What is implicit in this script, but what we rarely look at or see, is that written into this script is the understanding that the price for *good* people being rewarded is the cost of bad people being punished.

In the Luke Passage, we hear Jesus countering this script. "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" And he answers his own question: No, the suffering of the Galileans wasn't about their sin.

He counters this de-forming theology a second time: "Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?" And again, he answers, No. The victims who died by Pilate's hand and the victims who died when the tower fell were not being punished by God. In fact, God had nothing to do with it. It was Pilate who killed those people. And it was an accident or poor construction that killed the others. Jesus is clear, these victims, these people who died, were not paying a price for their sins.

But Jesus says something else, as well, something less assuring, even disturbing. After each No, he adds, "but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." It sure sounds like he's contradicting himself, doesn't it? "Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." What does that mean?

And then he tells a parable of an unproductive fig tree. But even that ends with, “If the tree doesn’t produce, you can cut it down.”

Where is the good news here? Where is the wine, and milk, and rich food that are without a price? Because at the surface, this sure sounds like there’s a price to pay. So, let’s do what the gardener in the parable suggests and dig around to see if there’s a deeper meaning to uncover!

“Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” At the surface it sounds like death is the judgment and punishment for not repenting. But the thing is, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. And he will die there. He will become a victim of violence. But *his* death isn’t punishment. So how is Jesus’ death different from the deaths of the victims in these two stories? What about repentance? Did Jesus repent? What does he mean, “Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did”?

What if the parable is an illustration of the two stories that Jesus has told? The fig tree is unproductive. There’s no fruit. If there’s no fruit, then there are no seeds. And if there are no seeds, there is no possibility for new life. The man in the parable sees the unproductive tree and says to the gardener, “Cut it down. It doesn’t deserve to take up space.” But the gardener counters the man’s judgment and punishment saying, “No. Let’s dig around the tree, and add manure. Let’s see if we can’t turn it around.”

And there it is. With this parable, Jesus is giving us an illustration of repentance. “Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” It isn’t *God* threatening to cut down the tree—it is the *man* who is pronouncing judgment. It is the gardener who sees the possibility for new life, even on this barren fig tree. And because the Gardener is able to create life where there is no life, the Gardener says to the human, “Let’s dig up the dirt and add manure. There is the possibility of life here.”

Repentance isn't just the simple action or event of confessing our sins. Repentance is turning, daily, slowly, over time, turning away from sin, turning away from the lies and illusions of the tempter, turning away from the scripts that are burdening and binding us. Repentance is *being* turned by God. Repentance is giving ourselves to God, Creator and Gardener, letting God turn the muck and manure of our lives and our humanity, tending and nourishing and nurturing, until new buds form, blossom, and grow.

The response of the Gardener counters the script of the human. The human response is judgment and cutting off and it leaves us in an unending cycle of violence and death. The response of the Gardener is grace and mercy and opens the possibility of resurrection and new life.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. On the Mt of Olives, he will pray, "Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but Yours be done." Jesus knows what it means to be in the hands of the Gardener. He knows what it means to be turned. He understands the price of being composted. It will cost him his life. He will perish.

But Jesus is in the hands of the Gardener, even in his dying. And his dying, we know, will open up in the resurrection Garden. And in the resurrection Garden, tended by the love and creativity and nurture of the Master Gardener, we see fruit on the fig tree. It is good, rich, abundant fruit. Fruit that has no price. Fruit that cannot be purchased. It is not the cost of judgment or violence that brings the fig tree to life; nor is it the price of good behavior that makes it productive. But there is a cost, the cost of pain, the cost of struggle and loss, the cost of dying. The fruit that the tree bears comes from being *given*, from being composted, from being turned *away* from the cycles of punitive judgment and violence and being turned *toward* grace and mercy, toward justice and liberation, toward healing and redemption and restoration.

“Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” Unless we give ourselves to be turned and composted by God, the Cosmic Gardener, our deaths will be unproductive. When we hold on to our lives, refusing to let the muck and dung of this life be turned and composted into our roots, then our living and our dying will be fruitless. And we will perish just as the Galileans that Pilate killed and the 18 who died when the tower fell on them. And the next generation, and the next, will be more of the same.

When we look into the future of climate change, it sure looks like future generations are numbered. The fig tree looks barren. It’s hard to see the possibility of something good. It looks like it will be cut down and humanity will perish with it.

It is here, in this time, in this place that we are called to the feast. It is here and now that we are being invited, persistently invited, to feast on the Word of God. Jesus feasted on the sturdy bread and the sweet wine of God’s Word—God’s living Word. It is what nourished and sustained him while he was being humiliated and killed, as he gave himself to the great turning. Isaiah’s invitation is for precisely this time. We need the wine and milk and bread of God’s aliveness and life. We need it to satisfy our hunger and thirst so that we are able to counter the tempter who would keep us living in the illusions and lies that we must first of all pay the price to save own lives, sacrificing the future of our children, and our children’s children.

I don’t know how God will bring life out of what appears to be a hopeless and barren future. But I do know that the Pro-life and Merciful God (*as Julia Baker names God in this week’s Lenten poem*) is a Master Gardener. And that if we entrust ourselves to the hands of the Gardener, if we’re willing to let our lives be turned, composted, there will be an opening into a resurrection Garden. And there, the trees will be hanging with fruit. Perhaps not in our individual lifetimes, but the fig tree will produce its fruit!

It is not enough for us to pray for our individual lives. Our prayers must be for our children's children, and their children's children. And for the seeds within creation. And in order to do that, Isaiah calls us and Jesus shows us that we must eat, feast, every day on Living Bread and Living Wine. God's word *will sustain us* as we give ourselves to God, to creation, to humanity. God's living Word will nourish us as we are being turned, as the Master Gardener tends to the soil, the earth, nurturing, waiting and when it is time, speaking life into being.

May we give ourselves to the Master Gardener.
May we give ourselves to be being turned and composted.
And may we, daily, eat and drink at the Table of the Living God.