

FIG TREES IN DRY AND BARREN LANDS

PSALM 63:1-8; LUKE 13:1-9

Looks like this fig tree has a year: If it bears fruit, maybe more. How much dirt and manure will be required to survive: Only God knows.

You and I are not fig trees, but we understand pressure. If we were this fig tree, we know how we would feel. For some, schedules and deadlines are gracious and merciful. For others, schedules and deadlines are fates worse than death.

Every psychological test that I have taken since beginning the ordination process in the PC(USA) has suggested that I am “pressure-prompted.” At first, I thought that this was a euphemism for “procrastinating,” but I have come to think of it more in terms of time management, prioritization and motivation, subjects that are important whether one is “pressure-prompted” or not.

Sometimes I feel like being “pressure-prompted” is a curse. Why not do everything well-ahead-of-time? Because ambitious people seem to be more comfortable in a state of triage: Of course, other groups of people do, too, but for now, I am pointing out the perfectionism that lurks just beneath the surface of some “pressure-prompted” personalities. Without a year to improve, the “pressure-prompted” fig tree may never bear fruit.

In the public schools here, older elementary-aged children are expected to accrue a certain number of Accelerated Reader points per term by reading x number of pages from particular genres and then excelling on computer-generated tests on the books that they read. It stresses out the students; it stresses out the parents (and not necessarily in that order).

Back in the fall, Lydia pushed the deadline, and while she was graceful under the pressure, her father was not (and, yes, I feel like I may say this, because: (1) I know him reasonably well; and (2) Lydia has given me permission to use this story). By pushing the deadline, I mean that she had to read five

*Ron Gilmer, Pastor, University Presbyterian Church, Tuscaloosa AL
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books in four days. At first, I was so stunned that I had to crunch the numbers again. Never have I been so disappointed in the accuracy of a calculator. Then I started lecturing, and, as if that was not bad enough, I started preaching---not one of my usual grace-filled, happy-go-lucky-you-are-a-child-of-God sermons, but one of those hell-fire and damnation sermons that made it abundantly clear to Lydia that not only is she a child of God, she also is a child of Ron.

Lydia interrupted this sermon by asking me one simple question: "How many times have you written a sermon on a Saturday?" Suddenly, I forgot what I was saying. I had been punched in the face with the truth, and so, I said, "This is not about me. It is about you." Weak, I know, but she persevered because--or in spite---of the help that I offered her. Sometimes fertilizer is fertilizer. Other times, it is just manure.

So here we are in the middle of Lent, and it has been brought to my attention by more than one person that some commitments are beginning to fizzle. "It's something like New Year's Resolution Syndrome," somebody said to me this past week. Yes, it's something like that, but New Year's resolutions are forever. Lent is for now.

When somebody says, "Starting in January, I am giving up ice cream forever," chances are that person will find himself or herself in bed with a half-galloon of mint chocolate chip by Valentine's Day. But when somebody says, "I am going to run 5K per week during Lent," all he or she has to remember when it is cold and rainy is, "Easter is coming!"

New Year's resolutions set the bar too high for too long, and they are set for selfish reasons. Why do I want to lose weight? Because I think that I will look better, that others will become more interested in or jealous of me, but even if I am successful, when does the desire to be fit morph into an eating disorder?

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Lent is a season about setting ourselves apart so that the offering of our life and labor that we present to God on Easter is holy, acceptable and pleasing in God's sight. The bar should be set high enough for the discipline or disciplines to be considered spiritual exercise, and we should recognize that if we fail or fall, God is there to catch us. The faith that we practice, the faith that God gives to us, is rooted in grace, God's grace in Jesus Christ, grace that we cannot earn and do not deserve.

Remember how this Lenten series is framed. We start with the Gospel, and ask, "What is Jesus feeling?" Then we consider how he would pray the appointed Psalm in this situation?

Since this morning's Gospel reading is a parable, we are looking for the story behind the story. Why does Jesus start talking about fig trees when Jerusalem is in front of him? Luke answers this question in the beginning of the story: "At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." Human blood is being mixed with animal sacrifices, and given the way that Luke tells the story, the distinction between pre-crucifixion and post-resurrection sacrifices is beginning to blur.

Jesus is clear that animal sacrifices are not enough: "unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." Perish like whom? Galileans. Yes, the Galileans. Wait, they were brutally murdered. Surely, God will provide a lamb. No, not yet. Obviously, we all are going to die, the question is, "How?" Do you want to perish like the Galileans? Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them? If the answer is "no," then repent, and repent now.

Towers have been falling since Babel, and this is not enough to frighten Jews into submission, and maybe that is because human beings are not at their best when they fear. Jesus has been ministering in Galilee for almost three years. He knows the Galileans well and is beginning to read the writing on the wall. It is not difficult to imagine him saying, "For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none."

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If Jesus seems bitter, maybe that is because he is. To feel rejected by those one loves is excruciating. To stare death in the face and suspect that it is just up the road in Jerusalem is agonizing. Jesus thirsts in a blood-thirsty world. He is hungry in a fig-less society, but God sets a table before him in the wilderness. Surely, goodness and mercy may follow him, but it is that which lies ahead that burdens him.

Surely, Jesus prays, "O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a barren and dry land. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name."

Lent instills patience through self-discipline that finds its meaning in the sure and certain hope that the Lord provides. In this parable and in this Psalm, the Lord provides in crisis after crisis: when towers crash and God's children act violently toward one another. In this same story and in this same Psalm, the Lord provides peace by giving a fig tree one more year to produce fruit and by providing sanctuary in places where wine is poured and bread is served to all who gather there.

How you feel at the end of this parable says something about who you are and how you are wired. What do you think happens in a year? Does the fig tree bear fruit or not? If you say that it will, then you are intrinsically hopeful. If you say that it will not, then maybe, just maybe, you are spending too much time in the shadows that darken the wilderness of Lent.

Looking at the stories that Jesus tells and asking, "What are the stories behind the stories?" is a practice that translates well to the spiritual disciplines that we practice this time of the year, because self-examination and repentance go hand-in-hand. What stories do you like to tell again and again? What do they say about you? What stories do you notice your neighbors telling again and again? What do they say about them? May the stories that we tell exude love of God, love of self and love of

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neighbor. May the stories that our neighbors tell help us to understand how to love them, especially when they seem unlovable.

With love of God, self and neighbor come contentment in body, mind and spirit; and with this faith, God moves mountains. At the end of Lent, when Easter arrives, may we find ourselves eager to pray: “My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, as my mouth praises you with joyful lips when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.” If God’s right hand did not uphold us, not one of us would stand, but because God gracious and merciful, we stand and set our faces toward Jerusalem. Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

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