

Turning

Isaiah 55:1-9 Luke 13:1-9

Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church
March 11, 2007

Walking, standing, turning, returning, running, singing ... these are the basics of our journey during this season of Lent.

We walk toward the fulfillment of God's vision for creation. We stand on the firm foundation of God's love. We turn away from the ways of the world and toward the correct path. We return to God continually to experience grace and receive assurance. We run as disciplined athletes toward the goal before us. In dark times we sing because the light never goes out.

On this third Sunday in Lent we come to a turning point in our journey. To walk with God is to change direction, because whatever path we follow, God invites us to journey on a more perfect path.

Jesus invites us to walk on God's path. That is the meaning of the parable of the fig tree. Today is the day to sink our roots in the fertile ground of God's grace and bear fruit.

The context of the parable of the fig tree is a discussion about tragedy. "Those eighteen people upon whom the tower in Silo'am fell and killed them," said Jesus, "do you think they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem?" (Luke 13:4)

The Bridge of San Luis Rey is a novel by Thornton Wilder about a tragedy that took place about 300 years ago. The book begins: "On Friday noon, July the 20th, 1714, the finest bridge in all Peru broke and precipitated five travelers into the gulf below."

The novel tells the story of a priest, Brother Juniper. He looks at the bridge the instant it breaks. He watches the five people fall into the canyon. If it had happened ten minutes later, he would have been on that bridge. He wonders. "Why did these five die?" "If there were any plan in the universe at all, if there were any pattern in human life, surely it could be discovered mysteriously latent in those lives so suddenly cut off. Either we live by accident and die by accident, or we live by plan and die by plan. And at that instant Brother Juniper made the resolve to inquire into the secret lives of those 5 persons."

But Brother Juniper never discovers why these five people die. Instead, he learns that they are neither worse nor better than anyone who would have crossed that bridge ten minutes later.

Some people were listening to Jesus teach, and they asked him what he thought about those "Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices."

Jesus answered them with a question: "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered thus?"

"Well," someone probably said, "that is what a lot of people are saying. After all, they were revolutionaries, weren't they? Or at least Pilate suspected them of being revolutionaries, and he must have had some reasons for thinking that. You have to be careful what kind of company you keep. They must have been stirring up trouble. If God had been on their side, God would have protected them; and they were Galileans! No offense, Jesus, but people from Galilee have a bad reputation, you know."

"No!" said Jesus. "And those eighteen people upon whom the tower in Silo'am fell and killed them, do you think they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem?"

Some of the people in the crowd were puzzled. They thought to themselves, "Isn't that what we have been taught - that God is a righteous God, and bestows prosperity on all those who live righteously, and punishes all those who sin?"

"I tell you, no!" said Jesus, "but unless you repent you will all likewise perish." You cannot look at their tragedy and smugly think that you are somehow better than they were.

We read and hear about persons who are the victims of disasters: floods, earthquakes, terrorist attacks. In Jesus' day many would have assumed that those who met with disaster did something to deserve it. Today, of course, few would say "Thank God, I am not a sinner like my neighbor, whose house was destroyed by a mudslide." But even today there is the temptation to say, "they should have known better than to build their house there. They should have brought their buildings up to earthquake code. They should have been smart enough not to be in that place at that time."

Jesus would tell us "there is nothing that makes you any different from those who suffer thus. Yes, they were sinners, and you are sinners, too." The question is not, why did they die? Rather, given that we have the opportunity to live and breathe upon this earth for another day, what will we make of our lives? The question is: Why are we alive?

Any of us could find ourselves short of our destination when the bridge collapses. We have all fallen far short of the life to which God has called us.

We are all in the position of the fig tree of which Jesus spoke. We haven't borne enough fruit to warrant taking up the ground we occupy. But the vinedresser pleads, "don't cut it down just yet. Let me care for it and nourish it and next year, if it still bears no fruit, you can cut it down."

Jesus' didn't mean that people should go out and destroy their fig orchards. And even if Jesus were that concerned with fig trees, the instruction from the story is not to cut down your fig tree. Rather, fertilize your tree. Nurture it today, so it will not continue to have a meaningless existence, an existence so meaningless that it would make no difference if you cut it down.

The real point of the story is that whatever life we enjoy at the present moment is not due to our own efforts but is a gift from God. In the present moment we are the recipients of grace, we are a fig tree being fertilized for another season though we have produced little fruit to this point. We are being given the opportunity in the present moment to turn around. That is what the word "repentance" means. Turning our lives around. Turning toward God.

Will we turn? Will we bear fruit next year? Will our lives tomorrow be more faithful than they were yesterday? God has the power to transform our lives. Do we believe it?

A Salvation Army group was giving its testimony on a street corner. The man playing the bass drum was asked to speak. "Well," he began, "before I was converted, I led a wild life. I drank all the time, I caroused on the weekends, I gambled away every paycheck. But since I've been converted," *[he said and then paused for a moment,]* "all I do is beat this damn drum."

(from *How to Keep Laughing*, edited by Richard Deats, cited in *Martin Marty's Context*, February 15, 1995)

Ah, but salvation does indeed mean more than that.

Daniel Pinkwater is a children's author and occasional commentator on National Public Radio. For a while, he thought about being a sculptor. So he decided to apprentice himself to a sculptor.

Every morning Pinkwater would show up in the sculptor's studio and say, "What would you like me to do today?"

And the sculptor would reply, "Do? Do anything you like."

And then Pinkwater would search the studio all the rest of the day, trying to figure out what the sculptor wanted him to do. Pinkwater says, "after a while, I would figure out what task he had subtly set for me, and go about doing it."

And then, after a year and a half, Pinkwater really figured it out: "when you say I can do whatever I like, you mean, that I can do whatever I like. I can work. I can watch you work. I can take a nap. I can look out the window, get drunk, read a magazine, eat my lunch, play your records, yodel, hold my breath. I can discuss Mozart with you, or get you to try to teach me to fence. I can invite my friends in and have a party ... So, actually, when you say I can do anything I like, you simply, literally, mean that I can do anything I like."

And the sculptor replied, "I say so every day." (Daniel Pinkwater, *Chicago Days/Hoboken Nights*, 1991, pp. 44-46.)

That is what the grace of God is like. God accepts us as we are, and surrounds us with the opportunity to drink of the fullness of life.

The sculptor was eternally patient with the apprentice. The opportunity to make great art was there everyday, and whereas the sculptor might be saddened to watch the missed opportunities, the real loss was that of the apprentice. He could choose to waste his time, and thus choose a "dead" life.

Death is not what happens to us in the future when we are judged by an angry God. Death is what is happening to us today when we are not connected with the loving God. Grace is the fertilizer. If we ignore it, our lives are fruitless. Is not God forever giving us another year? Is not God at every moment nurturing our lives, surrounding us with workshops and gardens in which we can create things of beauty? How tragic that we might exist another day and not absorb the Grace of God, and not allow ourselves to bloom.

There is a further implication of this analogy about the sculptor's apprentice, which is that when the apprentice wastes her or his time, the community also suffers. The community is also deprived of the art that might have been produced. When we use the grace God has given us, then we also spread the grace around (like good fertilizer) being co-creator's with God in the flowering of creation.

Bruce Larson tells about living in on a little island in Florida. He dined at a local restaurant called Scotty's Pub. It had a sign in the window that read "Free Beer Tomorrow." No free beer was ever given away in the six years he lived there. His point is that salvation is a today experience.

Today is a turning point in our lives. We have the opportunity to drink fully of salvation, to experience God's love, to pick up our tools and make something of beauty. Let us not hesitate a moment longer.