

**SERMON Third Sunday in Lent, March 23rd, 2024, Luke 13: 1-9
Emmanuel Lutheran in Lancaster, Pa. Rev. Timothy W. Sadler**

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.*

The gospel lesson today is somewhat of a puzzle. Jesus begins by talking about bad things happening in this world, then tells a parable about a fig tree. What does a fig tree have to do with tragedies and why is a fig tree planted in a vineyard?

People tell Jesus about Galileans who were killed by Pilate. Jesus uses it as an opportunity to call people to repentance, to stop worrying about who deserves what and pay attention to their own lives.

Tragedies in the world always unsettle us, because they make us feel vulnerable. No matter how safe we think we are where we live, we know we can't prevent things from happening.

So rather than feel fear or anxiety about our own safety, it makes us feel better to blame the victims.

Jesus is quick to point out that bad things don't just happen to bad people. We're all in this together in this life on earth, so when a tragedy occurs, it happens to everyone.

No one is excluded from the pain and horror and suffering. Whether it touches us directly or indirectly, we will be affected somehow.

Jesus redirects the conversation from who deserves what, to something that applies to everyone—Jesus calls us to repent.

Repentance is so much more than feeling badly about something we did. We water-down Christ's call to be transformed when we link repentance only to behavior.

Repent actually means to change your mind. It's a call to change our way of thinking and also our hearts so that our lives get turned a little more towards God.

True repentance will always redirect our lives. Repentance resets the compass point of our spirits, so we're turned more towards our True North, who is Jesus Christ.

The parable of the fig tree is a parable of grace. The gardener said, "let it alone." Another way to translate those words is "forgive."

When we wonder why this world still contains suffering and pain and ask why God doesn't wave a magic wand and make everything new, we need to remember God is giving all of us time to grow our lives, to bear the fruit we'll take with us into eternity.

As we continue to grow, to be changed and transformed in the midst of life as it really is, we learn something about perseverance and faith and enduring love.

So even if we're growing where we feel we don't quite fit in, like a fig tree in a vineyard, Jesus tells us, even so---flourish! That's why this life is given to us, so we can grow to be the best self we can be.

It doesn't matter what the externals are—what the situation we're in. If for some reason we can't change the situation itself, we can still decide to blossom.

We can still make an intentional decision to bear fruit.

Each one of us is individually responsible for the kind of life we lead. We are responsible for the choices we make that either grows us into better people or make us less than who we're intended to be.

But we are never alone on this journey. We have the Master Gardener who nurtures us, who gives us living water, who feeds us and renews us over and over again. This Gardener gives us life.

We seek to blossom, to bear fruit, not because we need to win Christ's love, but because we've always had it. And we also know that living a life deeply rooted in Christ...

This is the greatest blessing we'll ever have.

So anytime we find ourselves losing this Christ-focus, where we're getting too caught up in the things of the world and forget where our true heart lies, it will feel as though we're wilting—as though the joy and meaning of life is slowly being leached out of us.

And not because Christ has withdrawn from us, but because we stopped drinking from the living water that flows from His life into ours.

That's exactly the moment we need to repent, when it hits us, we've lost sight of the purpose of our lives and the One who gives us that purpose.

When Christ is no longer the center of our focus, then it becomes too easy to get caught up in the tragedies and chaos of life. When that happens, we become depleted and we lose sight of the amazing gift we have for bearing the light of Christ to others.

With all the violence in this world, with storms and floods and senseless killings and political unrest, we keep the light within us strong so we can point others to the light of Christ when it seems the darkness has overcome it.

This life is never just about us—it's about us and every other person we can help along the way.

That is more than enough reason to bloom, to bear fruit. It blesses us, it blesses others, and that sums up a life worth living.

Let us pray:

Holy God, you have placed your image within us and planted us in this world. Give us courage to fully live your image in us, in the midst of every experience. Your light within us and around us is never extinguished. Help us grow the inner sight needed to see this light and to fearlessly be this light, so that darkness can never overwhelm us. This we ask through the holy name of Jesus, AMEN.

Children, Youth, and Young at Heart Story

Theme

Fruit trees are expected to bear fruit -- so are we.

Object

A potted plant; an orange; a round, orange piece of paper; tape; yarn or string

Scripture

Luke 13:1-9

(Show the orange.) Today we're going to talk about fruit. In the Bible, Jesus said He wants us to bear fruit like a tree bears fruit. So go ahead. Let's see you bear some fruit.

(Pause.)

Okay, okay. Jesus didn't mean it quite that way. But before we talk about the fruit Jesus was talking about, let's think about how a tree bears fruit. (Have kids gather around the potted plant. Tape the orange piece of paper to it.) Is this bearing fruit? (Pause for responses.)

It's just paper, so the plant didn't really grow fruit, did it? How about this? (Attempt to tie the orange onto the tree and allow kids to respond.)

Is the plant bearing fruit now?

What has to happen for a tree to really grow fruit?

The tree needs to be a fruit tree, first. And then it needs sun, water, and maybe some fertilizer. In the Bible, Jesus told a story about a man who planted a fruit tree, and the tree didn't grow fruit for three years. The gardener told the man, "That tree isn't growing any fruit. Cut it down. It's taking up space in the garden."

Why do you think the gardener would want to get rid of this tree?

The gardener wanted space for trees that *would* grow fruit. So, he gave the man one more year to water it and take care of it, hoping it would grow fruit.

Like that fruit tree, Jesus says He wants us to grow fruit. Fruit for us is like characteristics or qualities that show we're really His followers. But like a tree must actually be a fruit tree to bear fruit, we have to be Jesus' followers before we can bear fruit. In the Bible, Jesus tells us to turn away from our wrong choices and believe in Him. Then, like a tree that has the right water and sun to grow fruit, we too, can grow "fruit." We'll learn more about that today.

Dear God, we admit we make wrong choices. We want to follow You. Help us to bear good fruit. In Jesus' name, amen.