



CRUSADER LUTHERAN CHURCH

God's Vision Our Mission

The Lesson of the Fig Tree: Don't Wait to Get Right with God (and Others)

Sermon for **March 7, 2010** — The Third Sunday in Lent

Pastor Sandra Cox Shaw

God doesn't always operate in a cause-and-effect manner. But we will ultimately be held accountable for our choices ... and now is the time to repent.

Scriptural Reference: Luke 13:1-9

Well, it has been quite a few months, the past few months, hasn't it? An earthquake in Haiti ... an earthquake in Chile ... this week, one in Taiwan ... a record amount of snow in Washington, D.C., that broke records that had stood for over a hundred years ... and during the storm, thousands of people lost their electricity.

Now who here today lost their electricity during the snowstorm? OK, for the rest of us, I guess we know who the real sinners are, right? And for those of us who kept our electricity, God must really love us and we must be special, right? At least maybe we're not as *seriously* sinful as the ones who lost their electricity.

I know for a fact — and you've probably heard it on TV yourselves, or on the radio — that there are people who are attributing the earthquakes in Haiti and Chile to the sinfulness of those countries, and the sinfulness of the people there.

I read this week about a family who lived in Haiti whose house collapsed; maybe you read about them, too. Their home was completely destroyed by the earthquake, so they decided to live with their eldest son, who lived in another country. And where do you think their eldest son lived? Chile...right. So they had two earthquakes in two months. Does that mean they are *really, really, really* sinful people?

Now people have blamed Hurricane Katrina on the sinfulness of New Orleans — we've all these so-called experts that talk about this. But on the flipside, have we heard anybody saying they won the Super Bowl because they were especially holy and



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righteous? If we're going to be superstitious, I say they won it because our youth were there last summer — 30,000 Lutheran young people.

And human nature does not change throughout history. We want to explain suffering and tragedy as a consequence of sinfulness. Jesus had people in His day who felt the same way. There was a group of pilgrims from Galilee — most likely, they were under suspicion of being part of an underground movement to undermine the Romans. They were slaughtered in the temple as they gave their sacrifices.

Around the time of Jesus, there *was* a group in Galilee that supported withholding tax money from the Romans. So perhaps, those folks were a part of that movement. Historians don't know for sure — there's not a record of it. But they *were* slaughtered by Pilate, and their blood was intermingled with the sacrifice in the temple. We do not know if they were rebels or not, but they were indeed sacrificed and slaughtered there by Pilate.

So the question was: Were they killed in the temple because they were worse sinners than the other folks in the temple that day? And one day a large tower in the walled city of Jerusalem fell. It fell and killed 18 people. So Jesus asked the crowd gathered there: Were those eighteen worse offenders than all other people living in Jerusalem?

Now the trouble we have with trying to figure out why bad things happen to people is that, for the most part, we live in a cause-and-effect world. Not all the time, but most of the time:

- ❖ If you drop a hammer on your foot, you can count on gravity to pull it down, and you're going to hurt.
- ❖ If you smoke two or three packs of cigarettes a day for 40 years, there's a very good chance that that is going to cause you to get lung cancer.
- ❖ Drink a bottle of vodka, get in your car, and drive on the Beltway, and somebody is going to get hurt — hopefully the person that's drinking, and not an innocent bystander.
- ❖ Be grumpy and grouchy and mean-spirited and overly critical with your family and all the people around you, and I pretty much can guarantee you're going to grow up alone, with nobody around you.

Yes, often there are clear consequences to the choices we make. On the other hand, cause and effect are not always predictable:

- ❖ Go to school, study hard, get a degree, and you still may not be able to find a job.
- ❖ Date your girlfriend or boyfriend five years or 10 years, come to my excellent pre-marital counseling class, and you still have a 50-50 chance of divorce.
- ❖ Eat right, exercise, maintain your weight, and you still may have a heart attack.

Cause and effect don't always rule our world — but let's face it ... as humans, we want it to rule our world. We want to live in a cause-and-effect world that makes sense to us. And we want God to make sense.

But God does not work in a cause-and-effect manner. God always keeps God's promises. God always keeps God's covenants. But we can be thankful that God does not always work in a cause-and-effect way. I think you should be very glad God doesn't.

What if each and every one of us standing and sitting here today got what we deserve? What if we got the punishment we deserve for how we live? What sort of things might we be punished for? And I'll include myself:

Bearing false witness ... worshipping our own ego ... name-calling ... arrogance ... gossip ... coveting ... being greedy ... you can probably add some more to the list. Have we truly loved our neighbors as ourselves — *all* of our neighbors? Have we loved our family members as ourselves? How would we like for Jesus to show up today to settle the accounts?

A pastor friend of mine has her own theory about what happens when we die and pass over — and it's just her theory, but I'll share it with you because I like it. None of us knows exactly what happens when our time to die comes. We do know, if nothing else, from the reading in the gospel reading this morning, that it comes in an unexpected way; most of the time we don't even know it's coming.

None of us knows what it's like to be held accountable for our choices. And as much as we Lutherans like to talk to about grace — and God *is* graceful and loving — there still is law that at some point, we do give account of our choices.

Now my seminarian friend imagines that when we arrive in heaven, we have to sit down with Jesus and watch a movie — *a movie of our lives*. And every time we are hurtful and mean and sinful, Jesus cries over what He sees in that movie. She thinks that would be more painful than any other punishment that could come — to sit there how you have made Christ cry ... through the choices you have made ... how you have not listened



The Accursed Fig Tree
(*Le figuier maudit*)

James Tissot

1886-1894

opaque watercolor over graphite
on gray wove paper

to His words. And I think that would be pretty painful.

I cannot tell you exactly what our arrival in heaven will be like, and I cannot tell you for sure what happens that day. However, I can tell you that Jesus is teaching in this lesson that **now is the time to repent. Life is unpredictable. Death comes to everyone, and no one knows when it will happen.** Towers fall ... earthquakes happen ... car accidents happen ... cancer, heart attacks happen.

The message for us this morning is that we should not wait to get right with God. I sound more like a Baptist than a Lutheran, but it's true. We should not wait. God offers gospel and law, and **now** is the appropriate time.

The message for us is to get in a right relationship with God. God is merciful. God is like that gardener, who didn't just say: "Oh, give the tree another year. The gardener said: "And in that year I will nurture it ... I will fertilize it ... I will dig around it ... I will try to give it the gift of life." That is what God does with us through the Holy Spirit. God works with us to help us get it right, through the power of the Holy Spirit. But eventually, all second chances come to an end, and we are responsible for our decisions.

So my recommendation this morning, in the third week of Lent, is that we ponder how we treat other people ... we ponder our relationship with God ... and that we get right with the people in our lives while we can. **If there is an estrangement between you and the people in your family or your friends that you love, my advice is: Try to make it right.** Other people can reject our initiatives, but take the initiative and try to make it right, because none of us know when we will no longer have time to do so.

And I do know for a fact that there is nothing worse than the death of someone who you are estranged from. I've had people in my office and people in hospitals that they didn't make up with cousin so-and-so, or aunt so-and-so, or their mother, or their father, because the time runs out and they can't. They no longer have the opportunity to heal their differences.

I lost my dad very suddenly. He was killed in a car accident, and one of the things that got me through it is I **knew** we had nothing unspoken. He knew I loved him and I knew he loved me, and we were in a wonderful place in our friendship and relationship. Try to develop that with the people you care of.

So listen to the words of Jesus this morning — the words calling us to repent. Ask the Holy Spirit to feed you as the gardener feeds that fig tree. Ask God for forgiveness. Ask for a new heart. Make peace with anyone in your life who you might be out of sync with.

And my advice — and I believe what Jesus is saying in the words He said — is to live every day as your last. Don't put things off. **Amen.**