

*Texts: Psalm 122; Luke 13:1-9, 31-35*

*Subject: Barren Fig Tree, Lament over Jerusalem*

*Theme: Time to Bear Fruit*

*Second Sunday in Lent, Feb. 28, 2021; Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

A friend of mine was in bad car accident this weekend. She was not seriously injured, Thank God, just some bruises and whiplash. She carried a stone in her pocket that a church member gave her some time back, - it had a cross cut out and the word 'faith' on it. She found it in her pocket after the accident, cracked by the impact of the seatbelt. Keep Pastor Kim in your prayers. One of the things that occurred to me yesterday when I heard the news was that the same could happen to me, or to any of us. Tragedy is just something that happens to others. Our lives are far more fragile than we realize most of the time. Sure, when I was in my teens and twenties, I thought I was pretty invincible. I'd take more chances, more risks than I'm allowed these days. I spun a car around a curve in the rain at least once. In my thirties, I was trying to find my way, and had to circle back a few times - changed cities, changed careers - but ended up meeting some good people, finding a good church, and building a family. These days, in my forties, I'm thinking about what comes next? Time flies, doesn't it? How did I get here and how should I prepare for what comes next? Things are changing so quickly. How will God sustain us all in the years to come?

Jesus has told his disciples not to worry about the future. God will provide and care for them. He's on his way to Jerusalem, and won't be deterred from the mission. They lived in a dangerous world too. Some are telling him about the awful things that Pilate has done. It's no surprise to Jesus. "Oh, do you think they were any different than

you?” That’s going to keep happening. What can you do to prevent it? Some of the people were focused on armed rebellion, fighting the powers that be to create a new regime. Jesus is teaching about repentance, calling others to follow him, to be about a different kind of life. He says, “unless you repent - you will all perish as they did.”

Repentance is a churchy word, we don’t speak like that in our personal lives most of the time. To repent is literally *to turn around* - to change your mind, to change your way of being in the world, to turn toward something that gives life rather than the things that are not fulfilling, the things that bring emptiness, misery, and death. Most of us struggle with this, and God knows it’s not easy. It’s more than a one-time deal too. So to ask - or to command people to continue to repent, to turn away from themselves, from their desires, from their selfishness and self-centeredness is a lot. But that’s what Jesus has been doing from the beginning. And at every opportunity to give in and give up, he keeps on going. He knows it takes time.

He tells a story of a fig tree. Planted in a vineyard - that’s kind of strange to begin with. Why is that tree there? Our friends have a fig tree in their yard and most years, it gives so much fruit they have to find new things to do with it. Fig jam, fig preserves, fig salads, figgy pudding? I don’t know, it sounds good to me. They grow well in the desert, when cared for. But it’s been said that it takes three years for a fig tree to grow to maturity. And if it hasn’t given fruit in that time, it’s probably not going to. It’s time for the tree to do what it was made to do. The vineyard owner shows up and find only leaves, only shade for his grapes, only a trunk sucking up the ground water. The tree is taking up space, giving nothing back in return for the resources it has consumed. So he asks the gardener W-T-F? (That stands for “where are the Figs?”) Tells him to cut it down.

But the gardener has another idea. Give this tree another year, another chance. "Let me see what I can do with the soil, with the watering, and tend to it a bit more."

What does the gardener believe about this tree? It's had an optimal existence, has been watered and watched for three years, and yet it hasn't produced. What's going to change now? Does he know something that the owner doesn't? What can he possibly do to make this stingy tree into something new?

When I think back to who I was in my teens and twenties, I can see I had it pretty easy. My parents worked hard. I was able to get to school, I had a safe place to sleep, good food to eat, friends to play with, and just about every advantage. NO, I wasn't very active in church, and spent little time studying scripture. I prayed now and then, but what was the fruit of my life? Years later I would see the divorce of my parents, and go through one myself, experience unemployment, loss and loneliness, before I even began to find out what my life might begin to look like. Sometimes we need to be covered with a little manure, in order to find out what it is we were made to do.

The gardener's response to a tree that has yet to blossom is the grace of more time, more attention, and care. This is the way of Jesus, who calls his friends to come and see. He spends precious time with them, teaching and listening to them. He's going into hostile territory, offering a new way of life, of faith and justice. He's giving food and healing, and freedom everywhere he goes, and when the time is right, heads toward the city where his earthly ministry end, and in time will be fulfilled.

Some people - Pharisees - warn him that Herod is looking to kill him. Jesus calls him a fox - openly insulting the ruler. He's not hiding. He's not afraid. He's doing what He was made to do. Jesus is going to Jerusalem - where he knows what happens to

prophets. Where he knows he will face his true enemy. Where he will find death itself.

The time is urgent.

There's another tree there outside the city walls of Jerusalem. The place it was planted was called 'the skull.' Jesus has been tempted, turned away, threatened with death, and yet cannot be convinced to turn away from the city where he will be crucified. There's an urgency to Jesus' mission. The work must be finished.

We don't know how much time we have in our lives. So many of us know what it's like to lose someone too early, or before we're ready to let them go. To believe in Jesus, to have faith, to trust in the promises of the kingdom isn't just a punched ticket to heaven. There's still a need and a purpose for each of us here, and it is to be who he has called each of us to be. We are called to faith, that leads us into the world, to love neighbors with radical grace. To give *more* than one more chance, to love each other even when we can't understand the actions of some, to give more than we take, to bless and not to curse, to serve, and not count the cost. We've got work to do as a church. We are moving forward with our mission to share the heart of Christ in the heart of the city - a city where neighbors are unable to pay rent, unable to find good work, unable to get access to medical care, or good schools, or healthy food.

We can't do it alone, we get to partner with Lutheran Social Services of Nevada and Family Promise and Nevadans for the Common Good. We serve by collecting school supplies, and needed items for babies and moms, and helping to serve seniors and neighbors experiencing homelessness. We don't always get it right, but we're trying to walk the walk, to show up for one another, to love each other into producing the big

juicy fruit of repentance. Even when we fall flat, Jesus waters us with grace, fertilizes us with mercy, and loves us as we grow in Him.

Because our faith is in the one who knows all the times we have suffered, who gives us time to feel pain, to be frustrated by our own ways, and leads us in time to empty ourselves of what weighs us down and turn toward that divine love. And even when we have been consumed by the evil of the world and find ourselves unable to bear anything at all, we are loved anyway. Grace is the time to heal, to learn, to be what we were made to be - freed from our own works, our need for control, our desires for vengeance, wealth, and self-righteousness, and welcomed into new life - utterly and completely one with our savior.

Amen.