

Thanks so much for inviting me to preach in Robb's place. I've been an ordained pastor here in San Diego 18 years and this is one of the only churches I hadn't visited yet. I'm glad to meet God with you this morning.

I'm curious if any of you recognize this famous first line of a book? "It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen." Yep, George Orwell's 1984. I've never read the book. Just haven't gotten around to it yet, but I want to. It's one of the most significant novels of the 20th century. A thriller from the very first line. "It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen." Not just one clock on the fritz, but "the clocks" – all of them.

Here's a second stumper. See if you can tell me what this is from: (sing Jaws theme). John Williams actually composed that music. The movie was supposed to be released Christmas of 1974, But mechanical problems with the shark caused it to be released in the summer of 1975 instead. The money made from Jaws created the very first summer blockbuster movie. Christmas used to be the biggest season of the year. Summer was for all the duds. Now summer is its own season of blockbusters, thanks to Jaws.

Back then (I was 4 years old, don't count) summer was a time for surfing, dancing & having fun outdoors, but this movie caused people to actually stay away from the beach. They were terrified of sharks in the water. The director, Steven Spielberg didn't know why, because he said his "heart sank when he first saw the shark, because it was anything but menacing. The eyes were crossed, the teeth were too white, its jaws didn't close properly and he had a big dimple that made him look like Kirk Douglas."

But the movie was genuinely terrifying for some people and it made them think before deciding to go to the beach. It made them change their minds.

I'm guessing you didn't come to church today to be frightened like you would be by watching Jaws or reading 1984, but did you know that parables were often told just for that effect? They were told to startle its hearers into changing their thinking and actions.

Here at St. Paul's you're currently in a sermon series looking at different Parables in the New Testament. A parable is a story, a narrative used to illustrate an idea. Specifically this series is using parables to understand the idea of God's grace, that great gift of love that comes without our earning it in any way. That is exactly what we find in the parable for today. But not without the terror to get our attention and invite us to know God better so our very lives are changed.

I always think its best for people to read the words in the Bible for themselves if they are able, so I invite you now, to either open your own Bible or take one from the pew in front of you to look at this parable with me in Luke 13:6-9.

You won't find this same parable in the other synoptic gospels of Matthew or Mark and definitely not in John's gospel. There are references to Jesus' finding a fig tree without fruit in Matthew and Mark, but it's not a parable, just a telling of events.

In summary, an owner of a vineyard ...also had a fig tree planted in it. The owner decides to go see if the tree has any fruit on it, but it doesn't. So he finds the caretaker of his vineyard and says "Look, I've been checking this fig tree for three years now, and it's never produced any fruit. Cut it down! It's a waste of soil". But the caretaker replies, "Just give it one more year, sir. I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it doesn't bear fruit next year, then I'll cut it down."

This parable, as with most parables, is an allegory, which means veiled meaning. It has a meaning below the surface of the actual story. It

can be read different ways, but today I invite you to understand it this way John Wesley outlined in Explanatory Notes on the Bible:

The owner of the vineyard is God.

The caretaker of the vineyard are pastors and lay leaders.

And the fig tree symbolizes the people of the church.

Over the years I've read this parable quite a few times and there's one phrase that's always troubled me, kinda gives me a pain in my heart. Doesn't sit right with me. I think it's the "horror" part of this parable and I wonder if it catches you too. It's in verse seven, which symbolically speaking, is God talking about people in the church who, evidently, have not been actively spreading God's love through faith and action and he says "Cut down the fig tree! It hasn't produced, so why should it use up the soil?"

Those words just makes me cringe. It doesn't sound like the God I know. This sounds like a God who would turn His back on his own created beings because *they aren't worth anything*? Because they're not producing? This sounds like a God who would give up on me if I'm not constantly at work for Him. What about grace? About mercy? It's confusing. Troubling. Frightening even.

I said that I'd read this parable several times, but I'd never studied or prayed on it before. As I studied it to prepare for this sermon, I found some powerful, simple things to help me understand who God really is. And this is what I want to share with you today.

The first thing - is a reminder of what I already shared. Part of the purpose of a parable is to stun or shock the hearer. It's partly a horror story meant make the hearer stop and really think. So part of this phrase "Cut it down! It's wasting soil." Is purely theater meant to shock us on purpose. It's not meant to teach us

something about God, but to make us ask the question "Is that really who God is?" and then look around for other thoughts in the scripture to help us understand for ourselves.

Well, I've done the "Looking around" for you in my preparation. And that includes reading two other places in the Bible. The first is verses 1-5 just before the parable. Look at those verses with me now. (Read 1-5)

Luke doesn't explain anywhere else in his gospel, nor anyone else in the Bible, what happened when Pilate "mixed the blood of the Galileans with their sacrifices", but having people killed while worshiping in the temple did fit the reputation of Pilate. So that's probably what happened. And the other incident of 18 people dying from a tower falling on them, is also not mentioned or explained elsewhere. But the Jewish understanding in those days was that God allowed catastrophe or calamity to happen, because people were sinful. God was a punisher. God cut people down on purpose.

Here's the second powerful point. Does God punish? Is God behind disaster and mayhem? The fig tree wasn't producing, so God said to cut down. Is God behind flood waters rising or wildfires burning or someone getting sick or losing a job? Is it all on purpose? When I study these words in scripture before us today, I believe Jesus gives us a clear answer. Look at the beginning of verses 3 and 5. They are the same words repeated twice that we take with us into the parable. I like how it's phrased in the NIV.

"I tell you, no!" That's what other people believe and are teaching, but "I tell you, no!"

And then Jesus goes on to explain the next powerful point: Instead, God provides caretakers and time when things go wrong.

What do people say are the greatest healers of tragedy? Time and the love of others. Right?

So when disasters come, which they will – and the Bible doesn't explain why- Is it God cutting us down? "I tell you, no."

Instead God provides time and caretakers to tend us and fertilize us, definitely even me. God is always offering us Grace upon grace. You know what's really interesting, there are other ancient stories in Near Eastern wisdom literature almost exactly like this. Want to know what's different? The caretaker does not ask for TIME to FERTILIZE the tree. He just cuts it down. The most significant difference. Our God is a God of mercy and grace.

Which leads to my last powerful point. The caretaker has the audacity in this parable to talk back to the owner, to try to change his mind, to work toward a different ending. If the owner, God, is a punitive, merciless authority, God wouldn't put up with talking back. "You don't talk back to your elders" as my mom used to say. But look! The caretaker doesn't get zapped for making this request. And Moses didn't either.

In our Old Testament passage we heard Moses doing the same thing when Aaron and the people made golden images to worship, instead of God, on Mount Sinai. In Exodus 32 Moses says, "O Lord, why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Turn from your fierce anger, relent and do not bring disaster on your people." How does the story finish? The Lord relents. Of course! Mercy. Grace.

I think we're being taught here to talk back to God. When things get tough and we don't like the direction life is going that's the BEST time to talk back to God, even out of our anger, 'cuz God can handle it. God just wants that conversation to start.

BUT, we better be willing to listen and hear... and then possibly change... in response. I'm sure you already know that the word repent in Greek basically means to turn around, to

change your mind and life. Repentance is a pretty good way to go.

I really like how this parable doesn't have an ending. Did you notice that? We don't know whether the fig tree produces for many long years.... or not.

I think the ending is up to us. We get to create the ending. We have a say.

But please don't miss the urgency. And I think this is obvious even in a quick reading of this parable and the verses just before it. Hear these words again coming from God in the narrative:

"I've been coming to look for fruit."

"Unless you repent, you too will all perish."

"If it bears fruit NEXT YEAR, fine. If not, cut it down."

When is "next year"? Only God knows.

2 Peter 3:8 "With the Lord, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day."

Maybe some of us have already been given almost a year. I think we, individually before God, can only know where we are on that time clock.

But I know on this clock I need to wrap it up.

I invite you all to pray again with me and as you bow your heads and close your eyes, if you have heard this sermon and sense that maybe now is your time to either turn to God through Jesus or turn back to God, I invite you to whisper this prayer, just between you and God:

Oh God I trust in your grace given to me... as you became flesh in Jesus... and experienced death so I can now be spiritually free. I need you. You are life. I accept the gift of your Holy Spirit living inside me that I might have life abundantly. And now help me go and fertilize others who also need to grow in your grace. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Daily Devotional for July 10-14, 2017

Monday July 10

Scripture: Matthew 25:14-30

Here is another "terrifying" parable. If symbolically the *Master* is God, why in vs. 30 would he call the servant worthless and throw him into the outer darkness? I think the key is vs. 24 where the servant states his belief about God's nature and then makes decisions for his wealth and life based on it. God allows the servant to decide his own end in a way.

Questions:

What do you believe about God's nature?
Do you think your beliefs about God affect or inform your life choices? How?

Tuesday, July 11

Scripture: Mark 11:12-14, 20-25

This is one of the other fig tree references in the New Testament. Again, Jesus' response seems harsh. But notice in vs. 13 that the fig tree was in leaf. In that region, a fig tree might produce 10 of 12 months, though not technically "in season". Generally if a fig tree was producing leaves it also had fruit, hence Jesus' anticipation, from a distance, to be fed. His very human response is strong disappointment.

Questions:

Which fruits of the Spirit do you produce most: Love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness or self-control?
Which fruits of the Spirit might you work more on producing?

Wednesday, July 12

Scripture: Luke 4:14-30

After you read this passage, use two other resources (commentary, search on internet or in books, Bible app) to help you understand it better. Then sit quietly a while and prayerfully think about what you don't understand.

Questions:

Has this experience changed your understanding of the passage?
If so, how?

Thursday, July 13

Scripture: Exodus 32:15-33

Here is the next part of the Exodus story I mentioned on Sunday. Notice in vs. 32 Moses again goes before God to seek forgiveness and even puts his own life on the line. I like the reply God gives – 'thanks Moses, but only I decide who to blot out of my book. You just concentrate on leading my people.' (paraphrase mine).

Questions:

God also talks about "cutting down/blotting out" in the parable from Sunday. Some Christians believe they know who will perish and who is saved. What do you believe? If you are curious about this it might be a good topic to discuss in a group Bible study.

Friday, July 14

Scripture: Luke 12:54-59

Time is an element in this passage and in the parable from last Sunday. Most days we feel like we don't have enough time in a day to get everything done. Maybe the same is true spiritually? Jesus asks the crowd here to identify with a debtor being hauled to court just as in the sermon parable he asks people to identify with the fig tree given one last chance. The point is the same: Time is short; now is the time to put things right with God.

Questions:

Would you change your life in any way if you knew you had a short time to live?
If so, what would you change?