



Sermon Preparatory Notes

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Sermon Notes:

Luke 13:1-9 (10-17)

Commentary 1 by Ronald Allen from Working Preacher

Over the years, I have heard a number of sermons on this passage that have missed the exegetical boat because they focused entirely on the question of the relationship between sin and suffering (Luke 13:2-5).

Preachers love to point out that Jesus denies that sin immediately caused the deaths of the Galileans and those at the tower of Siloam. To be sure, the relationship between sin and suffering is important, but it is secondary to the driving concern of Luke 13:1-9: to call people to repentance. By placing this passage in Lent, the lectionary views repentance as part of the church's preparation for the Day of Resurrection.

Luke wrote the Gospel and Acts from a largely apocalyptic perspective. For apocalyptic theologians, the present (old) age is so broken that God must replace it with a new age (the Realm of God) in order to be faithful to God's promises. Apocalyptic thinkers expect God to end the old and begin the new with a dramatic apocalypse. Writers in the Jesus tradition modify this scheme by seeing Jesus announcing the coming of the Realm and realizing it in a partial way until God will finally and fully manifest it at the second coming. The apocalypse will be accompanied by God's final judgment when some are welcomed into the Realm and others are consigned to punishment.

Scholars rightly observe that Luke believes that God has delayed the second coming. One of Luke's purposes in writing is to help the congregation maintain faith, life and witness during the delay. The delay gives people the opportunity to repent.

John the Baptist announces a key way in which people can prepare for the coming of the Realm: "Bear fruits worthy of repentance" (Luke 3:8; see also 3:3). Some Christians think of repentance as feeling sorry for one's personal sin.

While such perception can be a part of repentance, in the Bible repentance is much larger and often contains a corporate element. Indeed, repentance refers to individuals and communities turning away from things that violate God's purposes (such as idolatry, injustice, and exploitation) and turning towards faithful living centered in worship of the most-high God and in the practice of

justice, mutual commitment, and other values of living in covenant.

By using John the Baptist to introduce the ministry of Jesus, Luke signals that repentance is an essential step in the journey of the community towards the Realm of God. Jesus himself emphasizes this notion and gives it a full expression in Luke 13:1-9.

Luke 12:1-59 sets the stage for today's text. The long interaction between Jesus and the disciples in 12:1-59 revolves around the theme of being ready for the apocalypse. Jesus admonishes the disciples to acknowledge Jesus (12:8-12), to be responsible stewards (12:13-21), to live in confidence in the provision of God (12:22-34), to be ready (12:35-40), to be faithful (12:41-48), to endure the social disruption of the last days (12:49-53), and to recognize the signs that the apocalypse is ahead (12:54-56). Jesus uses the example of settling a legal case before the case gets to court to encourage the disciples to take actions necessary to be part of the Realm. If they do not, they will pay the apocalyptic price (12:57-59).

At that moment, some people call Jesus' attention to the Galileans whom Pilate had murdered (Luke 13:1). Their implied question is: Were those Galileans so much worse sinners than other Galileans that they were beyond the possibility of preparing for the Realm in the way Jesus had described in Luke 12:1-56? Jesus gives a straight forward answer: "No." They were not killed because of their sin. They were brutally murdered by the Romans.

But Jesus uses the deaths of the Galileans to make a point. To expand slightly: Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did when the apocalypse occurs. In Luke-Acts, to repent is to turn away from the assumptions, attitudes and actions of the old age and to live towards the values and practices of the Realm of God as taught by Jesus and as embodied in the life of the church (the eschatological community) in Acts.

Luke follows the incident with the Galileans with a similar incident about the tower of Siloam killing eighteen people when it collapsed on them. They were no worse offenders than others in Jerusalem. But those who do not repent will perish as they did.

The purpose of the stories of the Galileans and those who died at Siloam is to stress the importance of repentance as a decisive step on the journey to the Realm. That action is necessary prelude to the life described in Luke 12:1-59. Without repentance and faithful witness, punishment awaits.

The parable of Luke 13:6-9 presses upon the listeners the importance of repenting soon. An owner planted a fig tree and, after three years, came looking for the fruit. Finding none, the owner commanded the gardener to cut it down because it was wasting the soil. The gardener, however, asks for another year to give the gardener time to prepare the soil. At the end of the year, if the tree does not bear fruit, it will be cut down.

The listeners in Luke's community are in the position of the tree. The time has come for them to bear the fruit of

repentance. God could already have ended the present age. However, God is giving them a little more time. While the second coming is delayed, the apocalypse and the moment of judgment are still ahead.

We can clearly see the importance of repentance in Acts 2:37-38. After Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost, the crowd asks, "What should we do?" Peter replies, "Repent, and be baptized ... and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." This theme recurs repeatedly in the Gospel and the Acts: Luke 3:3, 8; 5:32; 15:7, 10; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 8:22; 5:31; 11:18; 13:24; 17:30; 19:4; 20:21; 26:20. As noted, repentance is the first step towards the Realm of God

Repentance is always in season. Yet, when people are in the somber, introspective days of Lent, the preacher has a particularly natural opportunity to invite listeners to conduct critical inventories of specific things for which to repent in their individual lives, households, congregation, and wider world. Once identified, the congregation can take the next steps: repent, and then bear the fruits of repentance.

Commentary 2 by Matt Skinner from Working Preacher

Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling? Not here. This time it's loudly and pointedly.

This passage divides into two parts, verses 1-5 and verses 6-9. I treat them in sequence, but we will see that they relate closely to one another.

Tragedies du Jour (13:1-5)

The passage refers to two events that were probably familiar to ancient audiences. The details, however, have been lost to time, for Luke is our only source of information about these tragedies.

The grisly mention of Pilate's mingling the blood of Galileans with their sacrifices appears to refer to a massacre of a group of Galilean pilgrims in Jerusalem. The narrative does not reveal why Pilate slaughtered these people, but the deed nevertheless corresponds with what other historical writings tell about Pilate's penchant for brutality. The verse offers an ominous characterization of the Roman governor in advance of his appearance in Jesus' trial (see the Gospel text for Passion/Palm Sunday, Luke 22:14-23:56).

Perhaps Jesus refers to a tower in the wall around Jerusalem when he speaks of "the tower of Siloam." Apparently a structure collapsed without warning and crushed eighteen hapless Jerusalemites.

When Bad Things Happen to Unsuspecting People (13:1-5, continued)

Jesus seizes on two calamities that may have been subjects of recent conversation around the local watering hole--one an instance of state-sanctioned terror, one a random accident. Both saw people snuffed out with little warning and for no clearly apparent reason. Both kinds of events lead the rest of us to realize how precarious our existence is. Jesus implies that the victims did nothing

wrong, nothing that caused their demise. He characterizes life as just as capricious as it is (to paraphrase Hobbes) nasty, brutish, and short.

Although these events might allow Jesus an opportunity to defend God against charges of mismanaging the universe, he does not go that route. Jesus only implies that we must not equate tragedy with divine punishment. Sin does not make atrocities come. They just come.

Life's fragility gives it urgency. Jesus turns attention away from disasters, victims, and "why?" questions to address those of us who thus far have survived the hazards of the universe and human society. We should not mistake our good fortune as evidence of God's special blessing.

Jesus wants to talk about repentance. The need for repentance is a universal condition, shared by random victims and finger-crossing survivors. When Jesus says, twice, "unless you repent you will all perish" like the others did, he does not promise that the godless will be struck by an asteroid. He refers to death in an eschatological sense, a destruction of one's soul (compare Luke 9:24; Luke 17:33). He emphasizes the suddenness with which this death comes. Just as Pilate's and the tower's victims did not enjoy the luxury of choosing the time of their demise, likewise the unrepentant will suddenly find they have delayed too long and lost themselves.

Is Jesus exploiting tragedy to score theological points? It certainly looks as though he capitalizes on the memory of recent horrors to stress the suddenness of death and the unpredictability of life. We are justly made wary by the fear

mongering that unashamed evangelists whip up after every natural and unnatural disaster. But notice that Jesus' approach follows a slightly different path. He does not promise freedom from calamity, but urges his hearers against false self-assurances. If life's fragility demands urgency, that urgency shows that life itself has carved out opportunity for us to seize God's graciousness, as the following parable suggests.

When Good Things Happen to an Unsuspecting Fruit Tree (13:6-9)

Jesus' short parable about a fig tree speaks of imminent judgment. (Recall John the Baptizer using similar images in Luke 3:9: "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.")

The parable reinforces ideas from the first half of this passage. A cultivated yet unproductive tree may continue to live even without bearing fruit, only because it has been granted additional time to do what it is supposed to do. Unless it begins to bear fruit (an image of repentance, according to Luke 3:8), the result will be its just and swift destruction.

Like Jesus' earlier words in response to the recent tragedies, the parable warns against false reassurance. Just because you have not been cut down, do not presume that you are bearing fruit.

The tone of the parable emphasizes that patience and mercy temporarily keep judgment at bay. The role of the

gardener offers a crucial characterization of this patience and mercy. The tree has not been left to its own devices. Everything possible is being done to get it to act as it should. Correspondingly, God does not leave people to their own resources but encourages their repentance.

Allegorical interpretations of this parable are unnecessary. Identifying the vineyard owner as God, the gardener as Jesus, and the tree as whoever it is we wish would hurry up and repent--this strips the parable of its force and produces theological confusion. Nowhere else does Luke imply that Jesus pacifies a God who is too eager to clean house.

Instead, the parable's power comes through the suspense it generates. Will fruit emerge in time to thwart the ax? How will this season of second chances play itself out? How do the gardener's efforts make the tree's existence a state of grace and opportunity?

Repent!

Repentance becomes less interesting when people mistake it to mean moral uprightness, expressions of regret, or a "180-degree turnaround." Rather, here and many other places in the Bible, it refers to a changed mind, to a new way of seeing things, to being persuaded to adopt a different perspective. It means similar things in other contexts from the wider Greek literary world.

In Luke-Acts, "repentance" also has moral applications (and connections to forgiveness--see Luke 24:47), but it cannot be reduced to a reengineered life and ethics.

Sometimes it is presented as something given, or accomplished, by God (see Acts 5:31; 11:18). It can be more about being found than about finding oneself (see Luke 15:1-10). It refers to an entirely reoriented self, to a new consciousness of one's shortcomings and one's dire circumstances. Of course, this has moral consequences (on "fruit" and "deeds" consistent with repentance, see Luke 3:8; Acts 26:20). But morality is hardly the horse that pulls the cart.

In this passage the *need* for repentance is assumed and so it takes a backseat in emphasis to the *urgency* of Jesus' call. Tragedy and hardship have their ways of nudging people toward God, but these verses suggest that tragedy and hardship come so suddenly that they often mark the end, not the beginning, of our opportunities to live lives inclined toward God. Don't let the introspective and pensive nature of Lent divert attention from the exigency of our condition.

Jesus' words about judgment and repentance are scary, yet they depict human life as a gift, albeit a fragile one. Vulnerable creatures that we are, we can presume little and do little to preserve ourselves. Too many Lenten observances assume that taking our humanity seriously requires morose expressions of piety. But the Christian outlook on repentance arcs toward joy. And it finds grace experienced within the awful precariousness and strange beauty of our fleeting existence.

Addendum: In the Aftermath of the Haitian and Chilean Earthquakes

Everything you've read so far was written before January 12, 2010, the day an earthquake devastated Haiti and its people. Now, weeks later, the terror and catastrophe has seemingly been replicated in Chile. The scale and proximity of those tragedies will make them easily recalled in a congregation's minds, when people hear Luke 13:1-9 read in worship.

It bears repeating that Jesus does not explain the causes of violence that nature and human beings regularly inflict upon unsuspecting people. He does not blame victims. He does not attempt to defend creation or the Creator when "why?" questions seem warranted. At least in this scene, he offers no theological speculation and inflicts no emotional abuse. He asks, with an urgency fueled by raw memories of blood and rubble on the ground: What about you? How will you live the life you get to live?

For people of faith, catastrophes like those recently raise all sorts of questions that deserve discussion and drive us to mourn and lament. A sermon that remains true to the movement of this biblical text, however, will focus primarily on the fact that tragedies arrest our attention. They shake us out of the complacencies or stupor that we use to get through ordinary life. They impress upon us, better than any preacher's words, the perils of our existence. But tragedies also lead many of us who observe such events at a distance--through word of mouth or round-the-clock newsfeeds--to protect ourselves with rationalizations and false assurances.

Those preaching on this passage might do well to press these questions: Do we build our lives upon those rationalizations that allow us to get through the day feeling blessed, safe, and able to presume upon a better fortune than that of our Haitian and Chilean sisters and brothers-- both the victims and the still-impoverished and perpetually at-risk survivors? Or, do we build our lives on the knowledge that God's judgment is certain? Do we build them on the efforts that God, like the parable's gardener, undertakes to prepare us for that judgment? God transforms us through grace, a grace that calls us to be generous toward those still trapped under the weight of poverty, want, and devastation of all kinds.

Commentary 3 by Audrey West Lutheran School for Ministry, Chicago.

When Pharisees warn Jesus to “get away from here” because Herod has it in for him -- the same Herod who executed Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptist (Luke 3:19-20; 9:9a), and who will play a role in Jesus’ trial (Luke 23:7-12) -- we might expect Jesus to take the hint and high-tail it out of there.¹

However, Jesus is not on a journey to get *away* from it all. He is on a journey to get *into* it all, specifically into the midst of Jerusalem, into the heart of the people of God -- even when they are determined to destroy him (“because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem”).

Jesus has been traveling through Galilee: casting out demons, preaching in synagogues, healing the blind and lame, stilling storms, dining with opponents, teaching

parables. Not long before this (in narrative time), he “set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51); now, he is determined to meet that goal.

Pharisees: Friend or Foe?

Is the Pharisees’ warning friendly or hostile? Modern readers too readily assume that Pharisees were legalistic, oppressive, religious authorities out to “get” Jesus because he violated Torah and taught the love of God.

However, Luke’s portrayal of Pharisees is mixed. To be sure, they raised questions about Jesus’ ministry and his interpretation of the scriptures. It is likely, though, that some of them were genuinely interested in learning from Jesus, traveling a distance to see him (Luke 5:17). They debated him (6:1-5), just as they would debate among themselves.

At times, Pharisees offered hospitality to Jesus, inviting him to dine in their homes (Luke 7:36; 11:37). However, they also criticized Jesus’ choice of dinner companions (Luke 15:2; 5:30). Jesus responds to their questions, but not in ways they welcomed (5:30-32; 11:37-41). Some were openly hostile, trying to trap him (Luke 11:53-54).

Jesus in Luke critiques the Pharisees for their hypocrisy (Luke 12:1), their neglect of justice and the love of God (Luke 11:42), their desire to receive honor and recognition (Luke 11:43), and their love for money (Luke 16:14-15).

Most honest readers will recognize similar characteristics in themselves.

Whatever the Pharisees' motives, Jesus' statements that he "must be on my way" and "it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem" suggest that neither Pharisees nor Herod can alter the divine plan.

What kind of Savior?

If Jesus heeds the Pharisees' warning, he is likely to be seen as a chicken-hearted prophet who claims to do God's work but then disappears at the first sign of trouble.

Even so, in this passage, Jesus lifts up the image of mother hen (Luke 13:34), despite several alternative biblical images of messianic expectation found in earlier scriptures:

- A lion, who uses strength to intimidate and crush enemies with a single blow, a military savior-king who promises safety and security in the face of border incursions and terrorist attacks (Hosea 11:10).
- An eagle, a spiritual hero or teacher of righteousness who soars above earthly dreariness, carrying followers to mountaintops of ecstatic experience (Deuteronomy 32:11).
- A bear, a powerful, prophetic savior who charges in to critique a culture that has lost sight of God (Hosea 13:6).

As Jesus laments over the precious city of Jerusalem, he names a very different sort of savior: a mother hen who loves her chicks so fiercely that she offers shelter beneath her wings.

And when the fox prowls, as he always does, the chicks are not left to fight for themselves.

The hen fights on their behalf, putting her life on the line to save them.

Jesus/God as Mother Hen

Insofar as shepherds and landowners are parabolic stand-ins for God, so too are housewives and baker-women -- and mother hens.

Jesus in Luke compares God's persistent seeking to a woman who sweeps the floor in search of a lost coin (Luke 15:8ff, part of next Sunday's text). He compares God's reign to leaven that a woman hides in bread dough (Luke 13:21, shortly before the lament over Jerusalem). Preachers may want to explore the bible's use of female-gendered language to speak of God.

In the Old Testament, we read of "the God who gave you birth" (Deuteronomy 32:19; Isaiah 42:14), a mother bear protecting her cubs (Hosea 13:8), and a woman nursing her child (Isaiah 49:15). Jesus' lament echoes Isaiah 66:13: "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem."

Imagination at work: Baby chicks

Jesus laments, "Long have I desired (Greek: *thelo*) to gather you...but you were not willing (*thelo*)."

Preachers might note and reflect on two things that are obscured by the English translation: (1) to speak of "God's will" is the same as to speak of "God's desire";

(2) people of God do not [always] desire (or will), the same thing that God desires (or wills).

What is it like to have a mother hen for a savior? What is it like to be baby chicks in the face of a cosmic battle involving powers that kill? For many, it is tempting to ally with the fox, or at least to call for the farmer and his shotgun. But that is not the way of God.

It is crowded beneath those wings, given that God keeps inviting others into this barnyard kingdom. Still, the hen stays in the barnyard with all of them. When the fox comes, she is there.

She is not the savior we imagined, but the savior we need.

Vulnerability and death

Note the many references to Jesus' death contained in the short passage (verses 31-34). These hearken back to the beginning of the day's pericope with its reference to bad and fearful news: Pilate's murder of Galileans as well as the tower that fell (Luke 13:1). Into this context of fear and death, the images of fox and hen heighten tension in Jesus' journey to Jerusalem.

Death is what happens when foxes go after chickens. But death is not the final word. Nor is it the end of the story.

There is no need to get away from it all, because Jesus is present in the midst of it all.

Luke 13:1–5 The incidents concerning Pilate killing the **Galileans** and the fall of the tower in Siloam are not recorded elsewhere in Scripture. **whose blood Pilate had mingled**. Nothing more is known about this incident, but Pilate had apparently put people to death when they were trying to offer sacrifices (see note on 23:1). **Do you think ... worse sinners ... ?** Jesus' rhetorical question reflects a popular view that tragedies and physical ailments were due to personal sin (see note on John 9:2), but his answer (**No**) denies any such connection in this case. **unless you repent, you will all likewise perish**. Though Jesus regularly has compassion on those who suffer, here he draws a broader lesson: this tragic event is a warning that final judgment is coming to the entire world. The **tower in Siloam** was probably part of the wall of Jerusalem near the pool of Siloam.

Luke 13:6–9 This parable symbolizes Israel's last opportunity to repent before experiencing God's judgment. **Three years** signifies that Israel has had enough time to repent. **Sir, let it alone this year**. The period of grace and opportunity is extended, but only for a limited time. **Dig around it** implies loosening the soil so that water can flow easily to the roots; if the fig tree does not respond, it will be **cut ... down** (cf. [vv. 34–35](#); [19:41–44](#)). The Greek construction suggests that this last attempt will also result in failure. God's graciousness and patience should not be presumed upon.

Luke 13:10–17 Jesus Heals on the Sabbath. Whereas the incidents recorded in [6:1–5](#) and [6:6–11](#) involve Jesus' *lordship* over the Sabbath, this account involves the *meaning* of the Sabbath.

Luke 13:11 disabling spirit. For other examples of demons being associated with physical ailments, see [11:14](#); but see also note on 4:41.

Luke 13:13 immediately. The contrast with the 18 years of disability magnifies Jesus' miracle-working power (cf. [18:43](#)).

Luke 13:14 For **ruler of the synagogue**, see notes on 8:41–42a; Mark 5:22. Because **Jesus had healed on the Sabbath**, the ruler's indignation was aroused, completely ignoring the woman's being freed from 18 years of suffering. Jesus was not violating any OT commandment; later Jewish traditions had added many more commandments and prohibitions than God had ever given in his Word.

Luke 13:15–16 **You hypocrites.** Cf. [6:42](#); [12:56](#). **Does not each of you** introduces a "lesser to greater" argument (cf. notes on 11:11–13; 12:6–7; 12:25–27; 18:1–8) in which the generally accepted practice of caring for animals on the Sabbath underscores the greater need to show such concern for a **daughter of Abraham**. **Untie** And **loosed** are the same word in Gree