

The Gardener

Luke 12:54-56; 13:1-9

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Those Galileans Pilate slaughtered as they made their sacrifices at the Temple — those Jerusalemites upon whom that Tower of Siloam fell — *they had it coming*, didn't they? They must have been terrible sinners. That is why they perished, isn't it? That is what Jesus sensed some in the crowd listening to him were thinking. Such a primitive, unsophisticated way to think, we may say.

Yet, what did we hear Pat Robertson say right after the terrible earthquake in Haiti? He said that the devastation in Port-au-Prince happened because 200 years ago Haitians, led by those who revived the indigenous practices of voodoo, revolted against the gift of Western Christian culture imposed on Haiti by colonial rulers from France. Right-wing religious nonsense, we say in response to Pat Robertson. Nonsense we would never affirm.

Yet, in our own culture as we have endured this Great Recession, what do we murmur about those people who were living on credit, who wanted their own homes yet could not handle a conventional mortgage? We who have qualified for conventional mortgages, what do we say? Do we say they weren't disciplined enough to live within their means? They assumed their incomes would grow and their house values would grow, so that when their mortgages were adjusted, they could easily handle the increased payments or sell their houses for a profit, didn't they? What do we say? Is it, "They had it coming"?

And our automobile executives who bet their companies on the huge profit margins of big SUV's, whose sales were dependent on easy money and cheap gas rather than investing in developing more efficient cars, what do we say about them? They had it coming, didn't they?

How often as we look at others whose lives are being ruined do we come to the conclusion, that *unlike us*, they had it coming to them? It may be tragic. But they should have known.

Jesus won't go there. In fact, Jesus declares we may end up more like these people than we might imagine. For those Galileans Pilate slaughtered and the Jerusalemites trapped by that falling tower, Jesus declares, rather than being ones who had done something to bring on the disaster, were instead people caught by a cataclysmic change, be it the fickle rage of a tyrant or the shift in the plates of the earth.

Cataclysmic change, that is what Jesus had been talking about to this crowd. Just before some in that crowd started telling him about the awful fate of those Galileans, Jesus had been telling them that the world as they knew it was coming to an end.

God's reign, which would upend the reign of every other regime, was breaking in like a thief in the night. "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit,"¹ Jesus warned. So, Jesus was saying to them that it is useless to wonder about how those

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other people messed up and had it coming to them. Instead, it's time to think about your own lives.

Thinking about our own lives, that is something an old farmer suggested to his neighbors and friends when they sensed cataclysmic change was about to break in on them. The story of this farmer comes from someone who grew up in a particular country church down in Georgia. It was back during an evening service on a Sunday in October, 1938. The preacher was holding forth when a member named Sam burst into the service trembling with fear and excitement.

Gasping for breath, he interrupted the preacher, shouting, "Martians are attacking the earth in spaceships! Some of 'em have already landed in New Jersey!" In the face of the stunned and staring eyes of the congregation, Sam stammered, "I s-s-swear. I h-h-heard it on the radio." Of course, what Sam had heard was that infamous broadcast of Orson Welles' Mercury Theater radio production of the *War of the Worlds*. But no one in that room knew that at the time.

The preacher, not having a backup sermon in his hip pocket on interplanetary invasion, stood mute before his people. That is when the old farmer got up, gripped the pew in front of him and said, "I 'speck what Sam says ain't completely true. But if it is true, we're in the right place here in church. So let's go on with the meetin'."

Indeed, in that farmer's mind, if the end of the world as he knew it was at hand, it would be better to be in church praising God than out in the pasture shooting buckshot at the sky.²

The way Jesus tells it, those in the crowd around him, which includes you and me this day, were not nearly as savvy as that old farmer in being alert to the signs of the times, and in light of those signs, in choosing what matters and what doesn't matter. As one interpreter of this text points out, Jesus implies, "Most of us are better at meteorology than at theology."³ "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'it is going to rain' and so it happens. . . . You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"⁴

Cataclysmic change is coming. God's reign is breaking in, Jesus has been saying. The way of orienting life as it has been in the old regime will no longer work. The commands of that old regime are null and void. The commands of the new regime — God's regime — are now in place.

Another biblical scholar notes that we don't have the choice of living under commands or living free from commands. We only have the choice of *whose commands* we are to live under.⁵ And as God's reign breaks in, Jesus urges us to turn around and live now under God's commands. "Sell your possessions, and give alms," he says. "Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."⁶

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you Do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. . . . Be merciful Do not judge Forgive Give"⁷ Those are not quite the commands for living the good life according to the rules of the game in the regime of this present age, are they? Yet, because God's reign is coming, Jesus is saying, if you do not turn around, if you do not change your whole way of thinking, your whole orientation in life, if you do not let go of the way of living by the rules of the old regime and chose to live by the ways of God's regime,

your lives will be ruined. You will miss out on life.

The issue is not that those Galileans or those folk in Jerusalem got what was coming to them. The issue is *you and me*. Indeed, if those Galileans *had known* that Pilate was going to strike out at worshipers at the Temple that day, if those folk in Jerusalem *had known* that the Tower was about to fall, they would have chosen to turn around and live that day in a different way!

If those folk in Port-au-Prince *had known* what was coming, they may have chosen to turn around and fled the city for the safety of the countryside. If those adjustable rate mortgage holders *had known* the economy was going to crash and that their incomes would not grow, but shrink, and that there would be no market for their houses, they may have chosen to turn around and not taken on such debt, but rented instead.

“What is wrong with you?” Jesus is saying. “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘it is going to rain,’ and so it happens. . . . You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

Perhaps those Galileans, caught in the cataclysmic change in Pilate’s mood, or those Jerusalemites, crushed in the sudden shift in the plates of the earth, were given no sign of the coming change. But Jesus is telling that crowd — and us — that the sign of the shifting of the age is clearly present for us. So what then is the sign that regime change is about to happen, that the old way of living under the old standards of life will lead to ruin, that for life to be full and fruitful, a whole new orientation of living is essential?

Jesus tells us. That sign is that gardener tending that fruitless fig tree. That sign is that gardener who pleads with the vineyard owner to spare the tree for one more year. That sign is that gardener who is determined to disturb that tree, to dig around its roots, to put manure, compost, around it. “You know how to watch for changes in the weather,” Jesus says. “Why can’t you notice the sign that a change in regimes is happening?” “I’m here, tending you, digging at you, disturbing your roots.” “I’m here, pouring out myself for you, yes, even to the point of being killed, becoming compost, for the sake of nurturing life, fruitful life in you.”

Even though we have been sterile creatures, living for ourselves as this present age continues to tell us to do. Even though we have been sucking up the nutrients of the earth to satisfy our insatiable hungers and have given little back. Even though any wise vineyard owner would cut us down, Jesus has not given up on us. Instead, he continues to mess with our lives so that we will bear fruit and not endure ruin when regime change happens, when God’s reign breaks in.

A renowned pastoral theologian used to tell about the state mental hospital where truly hopeless cases were relegated to a back ward. Psychiatrists and other medical staff avoided this ward, making only the bare minimum of calls and writing off the patients there as unsalvageable. Then a women’s group from a local church began, as a matter of sheer care and compassion, to visit patients in the hospital. No one bothered to tell these women that the patients in the back ward were hopeless, so they visited them as well. They brought them flowers, fresh baked cookies, prayer, cheerfulness, mercy. Soon, some of the patients began to respond, a few of them even becoming healthy enough to move to other wards.

At one level it was merely a church group doing what church groups do. At a deeper level, was it a sign of the shift of time, the inbreaking of God’s regime?⁸

Do you sense that the Crucified and Risen Jesus is still messing with you?

Do you notice that the Body of Christ, yes, even this expression of it here, has not given up on you even as most of the time you spend your energy on taking care of “Number One” — yourself?

At this table is the Risen Christ still providing a place for you, welcoming you here as a child at home? Is he still feeding you with finest wheat, with the bread of life? Is he still troubling you with his word, a word that calls into question your whole way of living? Is he still pouring himself out for you, dying for you, becoming compost for you so that you might become fruitful?

“Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees . . . ,” John the Baptist declared to the fruitless people all around him. “Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”⁹

“No!” says Jesus. “The Spirit of the Lord . . . has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. . . to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”¹⁰ “Let’s give this hopeless case one more year.” Over and over again Jesus makes that plea for us as he pours himself out to stir us to fruitful life.

That patient, attentive Gardener. His presence — right here in the Church — the Body of Christ in this world, is the sign that cataclysmic change is breaking in, that God’s reign is at hand.

So why are we still spending money and labor and life on that which is not bread, on that which does not satisfy? Can we not interpret the signs of the time?

Repent — turn around — change your whole orientation in living. For the Kingdom of God is at hand.

Notes

¹ Luke 12:35.

² Told by Thomas G. Long, “Breaking and Entering,” *The Christian Century* (March 7, 2001): 11.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Luke 12:54-56.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, “Countering Pharaoh’s Production-Consumption Society Today,” *livingthequestions.com*, LLC, 2006, Session 1.

⁶ Luke 12:33-34.

⁷ Luke 6:27-38.

⁸ Thomas G. Long, “Breaking and Entering,” *The Christian Century* (March 7, 2001): 11.

⁹ Luke 3:9.

¹⁰ Luke 4:18-19.