

Grace or judgment?

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In this week's Gospel lesson, Jesus says to the people,

Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No... Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No.

No.

In times of suffering, people seek meaning. It's tempting to explain tragedy by saying that someone's sin caused it. This view is reflected in some places in scripture and in more current sources (*The 700 Club*, Fox News), and we may hear it in conversation with friends and neighbors.

Job's friends seek comfort in this idea when they see loss after loss piled upon their friend. *There must be something you have done to deserve this*, they insist. *Repent of your sin*. But Job maintains that he is innocent. God is silent through much of the book of Job, and when we do hear from God, we hear nothing to explain *why* Job suffers.

God's response to Job's friends? *You're nitwits; shut up.* ([I paraphrase.](#))

Jesus likewise shows little patience for gossipy, pious speculation on the suffering of others. Instead, he shifts the conversation sharply from third-person theology to the spiritual state of his listeners. I imagine the crowd growing quiet and fidgeting uncomfortably as Jesus looks from face to face. *Enough about them. What about*

you?

Brian Stoffregen [points out](#) that Luke's "you" is plural: "unless [you all] repent, you will all perish." And the parable that follows is about a fig tree, often used in scripture to represent Israel. So Jesus pivots from conversation about "them" to conversation about "us." His invitation to self-examination, repentance, and renewal is a call to a community.

So the preacher might reflect on ways in which we sin in our life together, how we may repent together, how we are nurtured by Christ in order to bear fruit as a body. The question of who this "we" is offers another line of inquiry—family, congregation, local community and country are all possibilities, but our parishioners may also belong to other communities that might be called to corporate reflection and repentance.

Another question: Is the barren fig tree a parable of grace or judgment? Robert Farrar Capon [says grace](#)—but only in Luke's telling. Capon calls Mark and Matthew's "acted parable"—in which Jesus actually curses a fig tree and it withers—a parable of judgment. "At this point in his ministry," says Capon, Jesus "uses judgment-oriented imagery but gives it a resolutely grace-governed presentation."

Just before this week's reading, Jesus laments to the crowd that they "do not know how to interpret the present time." Just after it, he heals a woman at a synagogue—on the sabbath. When the synagogue's leader criticizes his timing, Jesus replies that the woman has waited long enough:

Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?

Jesus is already on his way to Jerusalem, feeling the press of time: every present moment is the time for freedom from bondage, for healing, for bearing fruit. Jesus paints a picture of [the fierce urgency of now](#), and the fig tree stands at the center—alive in a moment charged with the promise of grace and the certainty of judgment. *Now* is the time we have been given, the time of reprieve from the ax, the time of the vinedresser's attention and care, the time to grow.

The passage from Isaiah also invites the reader into a present moment electric with urgency, hope and promise. The pericope ends at verse nine, but you might consider adding verses 10–13, which bring Second Isaiah to its close. As in Jesus' parable, the

trees here are signs of God's grace and judgment lying close together. In First Isaiah, briars and thorns overtake God's vineyard as a sign of [the people turning away from God](#) or of [God's judgment](#). At the end of Second Isaiah we hear the promise of a reversal:

Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.