

Our Wilderness Journey
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(Luke 13:1-9 NRSV) At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. {2} He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? {3} No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. {4} 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? {5} No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." {6} Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. {7} So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' {8} He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. {9} If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Life is full of disappointments.

We expect certain things to happen, and when they don't we become disillusioned and disappointed.

We want our team to win
We want a certain job
We want a relationship

But things don't always turn out like we expect.

Moses life was one of many disappointments.

Most of us tend to visualize Moses as Charlton Heston, brawny, noble and imposing, able to smite down miscreants with a single blow. But when you look carefully at the biblical text you find someone a bit more closer to earth.

And if anyone had to deal with disappointment, it's certainly was Moses.

Moses grew up in the life of luxury -> but as a young man, his temper gets the best of him and he murders a fellow Egyptian.

He had to be disappointed as he left the palace of the Pharaoh to live the life of a fugitive in the desert.

Later, God calls him to lead the Jewish people out of Egypt - he is forced to duel with his step-father, Pharaoh, and ultimately flees with the Jewish people across the Sea of Reeds into the wilderness.

Once he's got them out in the wilderness at Sinai, things ought to be improving.

Instead, what happens when he returns with the first set of stone tablets - that we know of as the Ten Commandments?

Why, they're worshipping an idol in the shape of a golden calf.

And it doesn't even stop there -- throughout the forty years of exile, the people complain of thirst, hunger, and on and on and on -- enough to make anyone throw up their hands in disgust and walk away.

And perhaps most bitter of all, Moses is denied entry into the Promised Land, and only allowed a glimpse of the goal that he's worked so hard for as he is dying.

Life had too seem like one big disappointment to Moses.

But not once during all of these setbacks, does Moses tell God that he gives up.

He might protest that he might not be able to handle the burden, but he never gives up!

Life can seem overwhelming with disappointments!

And not only do things disappoint us: People disappoint us.

People make promises - they say that they are going to do something and then, well sometimes they don't follow through and they disappoint us.

And when this happens, we often become angry and frustrated

Sometimes

We lash out
 We bad mouth the person who let us down
 We break off the relationship

But the funny thing is

We don't think that we need to be held accountable for our promises or commitments, that we haven't lived up too.

We think that we are different – or the circumstances are different

We learn this at an early age

Things like: Little league
 Other commitments we make that we don't follow through on (that our parents have made excuses for us)

We EXPECT others to excuse us – and we are shocked if they don't

We have become masters at rationalizing our behavior

We make excuses to ourselves and others to explain away our behavior.

But more than that, we also make excuses to God

Our logic is that God will always forgive us

We kind of assume that our commitments to God aren't that important.

Our Scripture this morning is an interesting one

The incidents recorded and read in Luke's gospel this morning are unique to Luke's gospel. They appear neither in the other synoptic gospels nor in John's gospel. Despite the fact that both Jesus and Luke assume they are making reference to well-known tragedies in verses 1 and 4, those incidents are not well represented in ancient historical texts.

Our text this morning divides neatly into two separate stories.

Verses 1-5 form one coherent unit; verses 6-9 form another.

The incident Luke reports in 13:1 is certainly typical of the bloody, brutish reputation Pontius Pilate had cultivated during his reign.

Though it is difficult to tell exactly which incident Luke is alluding to, it is quite likely that this is part of the fiasco that Pilate created when he decided to siphon money away from the temple treasury for an aqueduct project that he personally longed to complete. This aqueduct was to convey water from a spring, some 30 miles away from Jerusalem, directly into the city. Understandably, the Jews took exception to funding Pilate's pet project with their temple donations.

Some suggest that it was as a result of that same aqueduct project that the "tower of Siloam," which possibly perched on Jerusalem's city walls, collapsed, killing all those standing near.

While the reader is told only that some people confront Jesus with this tale of cowardice and cruelty, Jesus wisely hears the question the people are actually asking.

The point of this grisly tale is to try to get Jesus to judge whether these Galileans died as a result of some hidden greater sinfulness they all shared --- or whether their suffering and death were the result of a random act of violence.

Jesus utterly rejects the notion that those who died at Pilate's hand were somehow more sinful than others.

But Jesus does not leave his answer at that.

He calls up yet another example of an apparently random tragedy.

Whereas the slaughter ordered by Pilate was an intentional act of bloodletting, the collapsed tower of Siloam is one of those freakish incidents of nature and physics. Again Jesus answers his own question with the same emphatic rejection as in verse 3, "No I tell you."

Only now in verse 5, after rejecting the notion that only the especially sinful on this earth suffer, does Jesus introduce the topic that should be the focus of

both these tragic incidents. "Unless you repent," Jesus asserts, "you will all perish just as they did."

The part I want to focus on, is again, only found in Luke.

This parable begins with the owner of the vineyard visiting his fields to survey their fruitfulness.

In Palestine, it was not uncommon for land given over to a vineyard to also include a variety of fruit-bearing trees.

The owner's visit is quite intentional --- the text clearly emphasizes how purposefully this man sought the fruit to which he was entitled.

Even though this landowner is justifiably perturbed at the fruitless condition he discovers, the man does not simply fly into a rage.

First, he presents his observations; then he expresses his disappointment; and finally he proposes his solution to the gardener, his servant.

The landowner argues that he has given this recalcitrant fig three years to produce fruit, and it has failed.

The significance of this three-year hiatus is probably based on the mandate given in Leviticus 19:23, which forbids gathering fruit from newly-planted trees for the first three years.

Having given this fig tree its bare minimum allotment in which to prove its worth, the landowner decides enough is enough. "Cut it down," he orders, and then further justifies the logic and rightness of his decision by rhetorically posing to the gardener, "Why should it be wasting the soil" (v.7)?

But instead of letting the land-owner's question go unanswered, this gardener offers another possible solution. His tone is respectful ("sir"), but this servant is obviously on the side of the fig tree. The gardener's solution is to offer the fig tree both the grace of more time and the goodness of a richer environment.

The parable ends without us knowing if the additional year of growth and the enriched soil succeed in bringing fruit to the fig tree's branches that next year.

Like the barren fig tree, we have the potential to bear fruit → but the truth is, we may not be willing to do so.

God calls each of us to accountability

Just as in the story, we are told that while we are given another chance, if we do not produce fruit → we will continue to wander in the wilderness.

Jesus offers to each of us a path that will help us grow.

He offers us nourishment and is willing to feed us spiritually so that we can serve God and humanity.

But the truth is, some will still not serve.

I want you to think for a moment of some of the promises and commitments that you have made over the years that you have not fulfilled.

It doesn't matter if they are big or little → I just want you to focus on them.

We need to remove those dead commitments from our lives and replace them with commitments that we intend to keep.

Rabbi Kushner has a great book: Overcoming Life's Disappointments in which he illustrates through the life of Moses how we too can overcome the disappointments that we encounter.

He encourages us to never give up, and to use the disappointments to build character in our lives.

And the disappointment that others have caused in our lives can be used to do that.

The disappointment that we have caused, however, we need to seek repentance, and not just remorse. As we begin to live a life of integrity with each other.

So take a moment and think of your failed commitments.

As you come and receive communion --- Give those failed commitments over to God and let God's good soil and loving care allow good fruit, grow in your life.