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Lent 3C
Peace, Seattle
March 3, 2013
Luke 13:1-9

CAN A TREE REPENT?

Can a tree repent? Can it turn from being fruitless and fallow to become fecund and full of fruit? Can it turn from stingy, unyielding ways and do the very thing it was designed by nature—by God—to do?

If the tree is a mango, the answer is an unequivocal YES, for mangoes have proven it over and over. In Hawaii, the remedies for addressing a mango tree that fails to bear fruit are well known.

- You begin by talking to the tree—even threatening it! Sometimes that's all it takes.
- But if talking does no good, there are other means.
- Some say severe, even drastic pruning is the way to go.
- Others say wrapping it with wire so tightly that it bites into the trunk will do the trick.
- Still others advocate driving nails deep into the tree's flesh.
- These things, I'm told by people who know, will often lead the tree to repent, to turn from its unproductive ways and begin bearing fruit.[1]

Beej Venugopal testifies to more gentle persuasion as he speaks lovingly of one particular mango tree cherished by his father.

> "My father's love for mangoes borders on the pathological," he writes.[2]
> "He spends like a gambler, seeking out the last fruit from the market long after the season has officially ended…Twenty years ago he brought home a sapling and planted it… He tended it lovingly until it asserted its place in the garden."

Overshadowed, at first, by a gooseberry tree next door, the mango languished in spite of his efforts. But when new neighbors removed the gooseberry, the mango, with a new lease on sunlight, soon reached above the roof. Summers passed. It became a home and haven for many creatures. But…

> "Even as other mango trees flowered in the neighborhood, our tree remained fallow.
> With homemade vegetable compost my father encouraged the tree to fruit but to no luck.
> One day he wondered aloud if it was time to cut down the mango tree. The tree heard him.
>
> "That year it flowered. Just a few, scattered blooms but enough to evoke a celebration.
> We had no fruits but the following year we got a handful of mangoes after the birds and squirrels had eaten their fill. The yield got better with the years and my father proudly gifted his hard-won mangoes to friends and relatives."

Trees—at least, the mango tree—can repent. It can turn from fruit-less-ness to fruit-full-ness; so that it does the very thing it was designed by nature—by God—to do.

And what about you? Is there a capacity within you to turn? To reverse course from unyielding habits and attitudes until you do the very thing you were designed by God to do?

That question, among others, is at the center of this season we're in, and at the center of our gospel story, a compact episode where there's more than meets the eye.
Today's reading follows a section where Jesus warns of impending judgment, and he sounds for all the world like he's channeling the prophet Amos.

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[1] Told to me by Lon Rycraft, UCC pastor and colleague who served in the Hawaiian Islands.
[2] From a story by Bijoy Venugopal posted at The Green Ogre. For the full story, which includes the citation of the Gieve Patel poem, *On Killing A Tree*, see the post.

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> YOU SEE CLOUDS RISING IN THE WEST AND YOU KNOW IT'S GOING TO RAIN.
> YOU FEEL THE SOUTH WIND AND YOU KNOW SCORCHING HEAT IS ON THE WAY.
> YOU KNOW HOW TO INTERPRET EARTH AND SKY—WHY DO YOU NOT KNOW HOW TO INTERPRET THE PRESENT TIME? he asks his listeners. (Luke 12:54-56)

He speaks of a baptism of fire that's being kindled, and how it's driving him relentlessly toward the city famous for killing God's servants. He knows how his own confrontation with the powers will end; and he knows, too, that it won't be long until Jerusalem itself will be laid to ruin.

There is a gentle, compassionate Jesus in the pages of Luke's gospel, but you won't find him in today's text. This is not a time for pulling punches or mincing words. There's too much at stake; people need to hear the truth.

It's in this context that people come to him with a story ripped straight from the headlines: Of fellow Jews murdered by Pilate's henchmen when they came to offer sacrifice at the Temple.

To this example Jesus adds his own: of the 18 who lost their lives when they were buried in the rubble of the tower of Siloam—caught in the wrong place at the wrong time.

How are we to make sense of such tragedies?

To listeners with an "everything happens for a purpose" outlook on events like these, Jesus says, point blank, YOU'RE WRONG.

> DO YOU THINK THAT BECAUSE THEY SUFFERED THIS WAY THEY SOMEHOW DESERVED IT? THAT THEIR FATE CONFIRMS THEY WERE WORSE SINNERS THAN EVERYONE ELSE? THAT THIS WAS GOD'S JUDGMENT WAS BEING METED OUT? NO.

The world is more complicated than that, and God is no puppeteer.

Besides, if God were in the business of meting out judgment and curse in relation to our sins, there probably wouldn't be anyone left on the planet. Jesus says NO to simplistic answers to deep and complex questions, NO to attempts to solve deep trouble with quick fixes, and NO to shallow theological thing.[3] And then he says this:

> UNLESS YOU TURN AROUND AND START HEADING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION,
> YOU'LL END UP JUST AS DEAD AS THEM.

Instead of speculating about people and events you have no control over, pay attention to the one thing you DO have control over—your self; your choices; your life.

Jesus puts the attention squarely back on his audience—and today that includes you and me. We've been hearing for months about the economic damage the so-called SEQUESTER could do, and have witnessed the inability of congressional leaders and the president to do what is necessary to achieve a compromise and avoid the damage. And now the deadline is passed.

What's so telling about the SEQUESTER issue is how old and entrenched this game is. Everyone wants to point a finger and lay blame on the other side.

[3] *Feasting on the Word*, p. 95

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Isn't that kind of game all the rage—not only in the body politic but in life?

- Liberals blame conservatives and conservatives blame liberals.
- Christians blame Muslims and Muslims blame Christians.
- Environmentalists blame Big Oil and fundamentalists blame Hollywood.

And amid the cacophony of nay saying Jesus says, LET ME TELL YOU A STORY.

A farmer had a fig tree, and when, after three years, it still wasn't producing fruit, he told his gardener, CUT IT DOWN. But the gardener said, FIRST LET ME SEE WHAT I CAN DO. A LITTLE SOIL AERATION, A LITTLE MANURE JUST MIGHT DO THE TRICK. WHY NOT ONE MORE TRY?
(Considering the alternative remedies for mango trees, the fig has it rather easy don't you think!)

NOW, says Jesus, putting the focus squarely back on us, ASK YOURSELF:
HOW IS THIS STORY GOING TO END FOR YOU?
ARE YOU GOING TO BEAR FRUIT OR JUST TAKE UP SPACE?[4]

Is there a capacity within you to turn? Do you have it within you to reverse course from unyielding habits and do the very thing you were designed by God to do?

This, it seems, is the perpetual question. The one that never goes away.
The debate is as old as Christianity itself with people lining up on both sides with an answer.

- Some say true turning is simply not possible, for humankind is simply too captive to violent, sinful, self-serving ways.
- Others say that such turning must be possible—for God would not command what we could not accomplish. With God anything is possible.

Jesus, today, says, STOP MAKING EXCUSES AND TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR LIFE.

And in the meantime, Jerusalem draws ever nearer, and the moment draws ever closer when nails will be driven deep into another Tree.

Not a fig tree or a mango, but a Tree of Life—with Jesus himself upon it.

- **A Tree whose roots, watered by his blood, will reach down deep and grip the earth;**
- **Whose limbs—outstretched—will touch the sky and yield such blossoms as the world has never known.**
- **AND FRUIT!—fruit sweet as honey, priceless, full—**
  whose seeds when buried will sprout and grow
  'till all the world savor its rich, sweet flesh.

[4] Ibid.