

Sermon Title: "No Time Like The Present"
Scriptures: Luke 13:1-9 (Psalm 63:1-8)
Location: Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church
Date: March 24, 2019 Third Sunday of Lent
Preacher: Grace Boyer

Singer and song writer, David LaMotte, weaves faith through his music and storytelling. One of his older songs is entitled "Deadline." It traces the relationship between a father and daughter, beginning with the daughter's childhood when her father was too busy with deadlines at work to be at birthday parties or family events, and the daughter would come begging for a moment of his time.

It traces the relationship up to her adulthood when she has become a mirror image of her father, so overwhelmed with responsibilities at work that she doesn't have time for her husband or child. When her father dies (heart deadlines) she tries to reorder her life to save her marriage and stop the cycle. Throughout the song, David LaMotte repeats the refrain, "There's no time like the present, and there's no present like time." There's no time like the present, and there's no present (or gift) like time.

This song has been on my mind as I studied our story from Luke Ch 13. Leading up to our lesson today, all through Ch 12, Jesus has been focusing on time. Jesus has been telling story after story about the urgency of the time.

- Stories like the rich fool who kept building larger and larger barns to hoard his belongings but dies unexpectedly one night.
- Stories like, "don't worry about your life, about what you will eat, or what you will wear, for life is more than food, or clothing." So spend your life on what matters.
- Stories like servants watching and waiting for their master to return after a banquet and being alert and ready because they don't know what time the owner will return.
- Stories like the unfaithful slave who misuses his time and power when the master is away and is caught red handed.
- Stories like how to interpret the present time, such as when a storm is coming.
- Stories like being dragged to court and you better use the time on the way to settle with your accuser or you might find yourself being thrown in jail.

It is wave upon wave, layer upon layer, of Jesus saying there's no time like the present. Figure out what is important. Time is short.

In the midst of this building urgency, people come to Jesus and share with him a current events story to get his reaction. Did you hear about the Galileans, the hometown boys that the Roman leader Pilate killed when they were offering sacrifices? Did you hear?

Now we do not know what this story is. There is no specific record of it elsewhere. But we do have records of Pilate's brutality and bloodshed as he tried to enforce Roman control over the occupied people of Israel. For the Galileans to have been killed while sacrificing meant they likely would have been visiting the temple down south in Jerusalem, for that was the only place for official sacrifices.

We don't know if the Galileans were innocents cut down in the midst of worship, or if they were targeted because Rome suspected they might be part of the zealot movement that originated in Galilee and which advocated armed overthrow of Rome. But whatever the story, the people who came to Jesus wanted to see Jesus' reaction. Like asking a well-known personality or politician a question about the latest news story. Did you hear, they asked Jesus? Did you hear?

And the reaction they probably wanted was either outrage at Rome's blatant brutality or some sort of comment on the methodology of the zealot movement. They wanted Jesus to react with passion to the story they brought to him.

But instead of commenting on Rome or the zealots, Jesus said stop looking at what others are doing and judging whether they are right or wrong, or worse than you or anyone else. Instead take time now to look at yourself. Because death comes to all, and there is no time like the present. Repent. Which means to turn around, and walk in the opposite direction than you've been going. To turn toward God.

And then Jesus turns to another current events story: the tower at Siloam. The tower near the pool of Siloam on the southern edge of Jerusalem. This tower fell down and killed 18 people. Again, we don't know the story, whether it was a failure of engineering or an act of nature. One interesting theory is that the tower was a part of an aqueduct Pilate was building at the time to improve the water supply lines to Jerusalem and he had seized money designated for the Temple to use for his project, so it was controversial. So does this story make a contrast between the zealots who were resisting Pilate and were subsequently killed in the temple and people who were working for Pilate on one of his projects and died when it fell? Or, is it simply a story about the fragileness of life. Either way, Jesus' response is, don't judge out there, look inward, deal with yourself first. To use the words of another parable, don't look for the speck in your neighbor's eye until you have looked first at the log in your own. There's no time like the present to repent and return to God.

The current events stories of Jesus' day may be unknown to us, this story of Galileans killed in worship by Pilate, or people killed by a collapsing tower, but they mirror so many of the current events of our days. The recent shootings at mosques, synagogues, and churches. The reports of cyclone damage, flood damage, highway accidents. We know these stories. The centuries may change, but the stories don't really, acts of people or acts of nature. Time is never something to take for granted.

I remember clearly a text message I received from a former colleague. It simply said, "Have you heard the news about Laura?" I knew Laura when she was a tween, bubbling over with vibrant life and energy, bouncing around in the church I served in Jacksonville FL. She used to come with her father on one of the mission projects I helped lead. At the time of the text message, Laura was a 20 year old college senior. She was driving to the church on a Sunday morning, driving down a road I knew so well, and someone ran head long into her. She was killed instantaneously. The fragileness of life, gone in an instant. Events like that are a gut punch. They make you want to pull your loved ones closer in, for safety, and never let go.

Jesus says to the people, look around you, whatever the story, life is fragile and precious. You can't protect yourself from every danger, from acts of people or accidents. You are no better or worse than anyone else death happens to, but don't waste this precious time. There's no time like the present. Turn around.

And yet, just as we are caught up in the urgency, or the fragileness, Jesus veers wildly and instead tells this parable of the fig tree. It seems like a non sequitur. But it is really the heart of his message.

The fig tree, in the vineyard. This is rich Old Testament imagery for the Jews in the book of Isaiah and Micah, who identified the vineyard with the nation of Israel, and the gardener with God. And for whom having your own vine and fig tree was a symbol of fulfillment and peace. Jesus speaks about a fig tree planted in the vineyard.

When I was in Israel/Palestine I learned of an old custom of planting a fig tree and an olive tree when a child was born so that by the time the child was a teenager they would have a fruitful tree to care for

and provide for their needs. It takes a while for the tree to become fruitful. Biblical and Middle East scholar, Dr. Kenneth Bailey, writes that the process was that for 3 years the sapling is given the chance to grow, and then Leviticus forbids eating from it for 3 more years. But in the 7th year you could start to harvest it. So in Jesus' story, the owner of the vineyard comes for three years (the 7th, 8th, and 9th year) to the fig tree looking for fruit.

That means the owner comes after 9 years to the vineyard and finds it is still not bearing fruit. For the sake of the health of the whole vineyard, he says cut it down. But the gardener says, give it one more year. The gardener who had planted it, watered it, cared for it daily says let me give it even more daily care, more manure (more compost). Let me give it a bit more nurture and maybe, maybe it will bear fruit. There's no present (or gift) like time. Give it one more year.

When I lived in the Middle East, I remember a young married couple with a baby on the way, who were trying to start a small orchard right outside their front door. In the dry, rocky soil, they had to constantly care for each small tiny foot high sapling, knowing it would be years and years before the trees would bear any fruit. The patience, care and hope of the gardeners. Envisioning and living into their futures. Seeing the potential in every plant. Those of you who are gardeners know this.

This vision of God the gardener, who is giving one more chance to the fig tree, one more gift of time, in the overwhelming mercy of God, against all reason and practicality, allowing hope to win out that the tree will bear fruit after so many years.

But there is still that final line...that it is only for one more year. Jesus said earlier that he had come to preach good news to the poor, release to the captives, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. The year of the Lord's favor. The year. Only one more year. Time is urgent, Jesus said. God is gracious. This is not about a hell and brimstone God out to get you. God is extravagantly merciful and gracious, and wishes full life for all in the garden. But time eventually ends for us all. And life is fragile, whether from current event acts of people or acts of nature. Don't waste it. "There's no time like the present, and there's no present like time." I am preaching to myself right now.

In our modern society, where we are bombarded with responsibilities, appointments, work or family, finding time is indeed a precious gift. And sometimes it takes being sick, or facing death to realize it. The season of Lent is a time to examine and take stock of our lives. What needs to be cultivated, what needs more manure or compost around the roots? What would you do if you had only one more year, one more day? How you want to be spending your energy in this one precious gift of life? God has hope for us fig trees. But let's not delay. There's no time like the present, and there's no present like time.

During this season of Lent we have been doing Visio Divina, looking for what God may be saying to us through pictures. The picture on the front of the bulletin is of a fig tree in Brooklyn, NY. I invite you to turn to that picture and then to close your eyes. Take several deep breaths. When you open your eyes what is the first thing you notice? Focus only on that part of the picture. Why do you think it caught your attention? Close your eyes and take several deep breaths. When you open your eyes, gaze at the entire picture. What else do you notice? Where do you see signs of life or hope? What thoughts come to mind? Take several deep breaths. What do you want to say to God?

We will remain seated today for our hymn. It is a Taize song that follows the practice of centering prayer, where you take a word or phrase and repeat it until you can sing or pray it with your mind, heart, and body. We will sing it 7 times through.

*Bless the Lord, my soul, and bless God's holy name.
Bless the Lord, my soul, who leads me into life.*