

Luke 13:1-9      The Orchardist  
March 20, 2022

The 20th century arrived with a great deal of optimism, especially in America. Some called it, The American Century.” The so-called, “industrial revolution,” was transforming the way people lived and organized their relationships with each other; democracy was new and exciting; there was a drive towards universal education for the first time in human history. Problems were being solved, the future looked bright.

Then the optimism turned out to be unfounded and hopes were dashed. Symbolically, it began with the sinking of the Titanic on its maiden voyage. The human mastery of nature was proved only a dream. Then came The Great War, although there wasn’t anything great about it except the fatality rate (towards the end there was a pandemic more deadly than the present one, at least so far).

Historians of WW1 are interesting because when they try to account for the war, offer reason for it, nothing they offer seems to explain it, justify it. There was no real good reason for it. The world just seems to have stumbled foolishly into it. Perhaps the causes ran a little deeper than they were obliged to look, but it shook the foundations in a way not satisfied by usual explanations.

Then came the economic crisis we call The Great Depression, although like the war, there wasn’t anything great about it, except the pain. And then

things got worse as the world fell again into war, with more than twice the fatalities as the first. And at the end, horrendous weapons were invented that have overshadowed everything among human beings since and over-shadow everything now.

None of the world’s problems were solved and some new problems emerged, like the environmental crisis that also looms over everything like a shadow. Perhaps the strongest lesson is that for all the other changes, human nature had not changed.

Religiously, the faith of many, especially in American Protestant life, was forced to contend with the notion that the previous optimism was unfounded. There was a renewed emphasis on sin that now included the idea of sin and salvation as a group dynamic as well as an individual matter.

“The Social Gospel,” you may have heard that term before, meant that in addition too individuals salvation happened to large groups like nations and involved the transformation of the economic and political order, such as the advent of democracy, or the abolitions of slavery, or the movement towards universal education, suffrage, and civil rights.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union and the end of the so-called “Cold War,” there was room again for optimism, but it doesn’t seem to have taken root. The millennial generation lament, although there are always dissenting views, is that they do *not* see a positive future for the world.

Biblical faith has always encouraged a realistic view, both of human nature and moral capability, and for the life of the world. People are not “essentially” good enough that they won’t, say, invade another country for no good reason, but on the other hand, can achieve some modest moral accomplishments.

And the faith of the bible, if I may speak of it that way, is hopeful; not only for the next life, but for this one also; not only for individuals, but for nations, for the human race. I could say that the other way around; not only for this life, but for the next, not only for the nations, but for individuals.

Our text from Luke’s gospel is aligned with biblical faith, about human nature. It calls for repentance, and mentions what to us are obscure events that were contemporary to them. But then we find Jesus once again using fig trees as hard illustrations.

It seems Jesus did not have very good relationships with fig trees, things do not turn out so well for them. They were never producing fruit when he wanted it, even if it was out of season, which doesn’t seem fair. He cursed them, or one of them, because even though it was springtime, and their season was in late summer, he was hungry. In this case, the situation seemed unrelated to the seasons.

It is a story, of course, a parable, and once again, the fig tree produces no fruit so the owner of the vineyard decides to destroy it. He is, however, questioned by his hired hand, who tends to the orchard. I learned a

new word this week. The one who tends to the orchard is called an orchardist, he said to the owner that he would like to work on it some, do some tending; dig around it, fertilize it. Then if it doesn’t grow, it can be cut down later.

It may not seem to offer much hope for a world such as ours or a people like us, but look again, harder. We might use the allegorical approach, it doesn’t work with every text, but it might help with this one. If God can be thought of as the owner of the orchard in this parable, then Jesus, ironically enough, is the orchardist taking care of it.

The orchard is the world, us. Jesus is the one doing the tending in this messy world, always taking care, pruning, applying the fertilizer, making sure things are watered, always advocating, “one more year, then we can cut it down.”

The orchardist is working in the lives of people and nations, thus we do not give up hope, unless we don’t believe God is really there, caring, loving, sacrificing. It is a little thing, but it is big. In the end, with grace, the fig trees produce fruit after all, and so do we.

It is Lent and we have courageously faced once again the sad truth about ourselves and the world. Because telling the truth about our situation is the only way to be healthy and the best way to remain humble, choose repentance, and faith, to nurture of frame of mind and a heart set, that we might allow ourselves to be tended to even when there is pain involved.

The gospel story is told, with among other things, two great truths; one is that human beings are limited in their moral capability, sinful is the old theological word; the other is that God is the loving, caring, persevering orchardist that at least so far has refused to give up on the redemption project. Some take this as a stern warning, “you have one more year.” But I don’t see it that way, let us take it as a foundational hope.

As the psalmist put it in the 131st Psalm, “Put your hope in the Lord, from this time forth and forevermore.” And remember Jesus, “let’s give it one more year. Year after year after year.

Benediction Blessing

The Lord bless and keep you,

The Lord lift his countenance upon you

And give you peace

The Lord make his face shine upon you

And be gracious unto you

Amen

[Back](#)

[Home](#)