

Church of the Crossroads  
Third Sunday in Lent  
March 11, 2007  
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HURRY UP AND SLOW DOWN!

Isaiah 55:1-11  
Luke 13:1-9

You and I, children born and bred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have a major problem when it comes to understanding the writings of the Newer Testament. We lack a sense of urgency in our lives. The community of Jesus, both the followers that gathered around him when he carried out his ministry, and the followers who came immediately after him, were immersed in a sense of urgency that shaped their way of being in the world. It began with the first proclamation of Jesus: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” There was urgency in the message. The time was short. God would soon come and bring about the new heaven and the new earth. One must be prepared. One must repent, turn around, turn away from the old and towards the new, from trust in the old allegiances and towards toward a radical trust in God, from a reliance on the religious mindset and practices of old and towards a costly discipleship. There was no time to procrastinate, no time to be patient, no time to take it easy. The time had narrowed down to now.

Luke, the Gospel writer, in this morning’s reading, takes up the theme of urgency and the need for repentance. Rejecting the conventional idea that suffering is a consequence of sin, here, in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus insists that everyone, saint or sinner, needs to repent now in order to greet God when God comes. How about those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell upon them? Were they worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? “No, I tell you,” says Jesus, “but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

Perhaps Luke, in including these words of Jesus (he is the only Gospel writer who does) had in mind those words from the prophet Isaiah which read:

Seek God who may be found,  
call upon God who is near;  
let the wicked forsake their ways,  
and the unrighteous their thoughts;

let them return to the Sovereign One,  
 who will have mercy on them,  
 and to our God, who will abundantly pardon.  
 Isaiah 55:6,7

The turning around, the act of repentance, cannot wait. Time is short. The theme, now introduced by Luke, is then illustrated by The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree.

A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. 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?’ He replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good, but if not, you can cut it down.”

- Luke 3:6-9

When we hear parables such as this one, we need to remind ourselves of an important principle of interpretation we would do well to keep in mind. We should not attempt to allegorize the parables of Jesus, as a way to turn them into moral lessons. That is, we should not draw a one-to-one correspondence between the characters of the parable and any characters outside the story, to make room for a moral interpretation.

It would be a mistake, then, to say that the owner of the vineyard represents God, or that the barren fig tree represents an unrepentant human being, or that the servant represents a disciple of Jesus, and so on.

That kind of allegorizing would detract from the central truth of the Parable. And what is that truth? Simply, that time is short, the fig tree is barren, and something needs to be done quickly before it is too late. In the story, some digging and some manure are needed right away.

Now, the bad news is that the fig tree is barren. The good news is that there is yet some time to do what is needed- not a lot of time, mind you, but a little time, nonetheless, to turn the barren fig tree into a fruitful fig tree. In the Bible, there are a number of instances where the barren fig tree is a sign of a curse or judgment, and a fruitful fig tree is a sign of blessing. In the parable, then, an impending judgment can be turned into a blessing if something is done quickly to redeem the situation.

We moderns have gotten used to the idea that there is plenty of time to do what needs to be done. And so our faith lacks a sense of urgency. We settle into a religious status quo, not unlike the religious attitude that Jesus addressed with his urgent message that the kingdom of God had drawn near. At the same time, however, something is happening in our world that may carry us right back to the sense of urgency that we find in the message of Jesus and his followers. And that something is *global warming*.

In a recent article entitled “Meltdown” that appeared in the February 20<sup>th</sup> issue of *The Christian Century*, Bill McKibben, the organizer of a religious campaign called *Step It Up*, puts it this way:

We need a movement to combat climate change, we need it fast, and we need to involve as many churches as possible. And you can help make it happen the Saturday after Easter.

McKibben continues:

How’s that for a blunt and artless beginning? The time is so short and the task so large, that eloquence seems almost frivolous. I wrote the first book about global warming for a general audience way back in 1989, and I’ve been writing about it ever since. But now – though I’m not very good at it- I’m trying to organize. And I need help. Here’s why.  
The climate crisis is bearing down on us much faster than most people realize . . . .

Bill McKibben goes on to explain that the temperature of the earth is rising faster than predicted and that, as James Hansen, the country’s foremost climatologist has said, we have just a decade to reverse the flow of carbon into the atmosphere or else we will be living on a “totally different planet.” This means that the changes we are making in our homes and churches as individuals and congregations, as essential as they are, can’t deliver the kind of change that will slow climate change. Says McKibben, “it means that we need to change light bulbs – but we need also to change laws.” “We need at the very least a federal commitment to cut carbon emissions 80 percent by 2050.”

This why churches must now “Step It Up” and take the issue of global warming to the streets, and on the Saturday following Easter Sunday we will have an opportunity to do just that, right along University Avenue or King

Street. Our Energy Task Force will be working on the details at its monthly meeting beginning at 1:00 PM today following the Second Sunday lunch.

Time is short. The need to do something about global warming is urgent. All of a sudden, we find *ourselves* located in the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree.

The bad news is that the life of the planet is in great peril. The bad news is also that we are simply going to have to slow down American consumption if the impending judgment is to be averted.

Here, I want to critique a phrase that is often used when referring to the American economy. We are told over and over again that when it comes to the economy of our nation, we must continue to “move forward.” Moving forward means a steady rise in our GNP, our Gross National Product. The market place, it seems, will never be satisfied with 0% growth. But anything more than 0% growth represents a further disastrous toll on the earth’s atmosphere. We human beings are simply going to have to slow down if we are to save the planet. We can no longer live with the illusion that we are going to be able to maintain our present life styles and rely upon technology to save us from global warming. We are going to need those technologies, certainly, but we are also going to have to learn to live with less. Hence the title of this sermon, “Hurry up and slow down.” It is not only a message of urgency and change for ourselves, but it is also a message that needs to be understood by our entire society, and the world for that matter. We need to hurry up and slow down.

The good news is that we still have time, not much time, but a little time to repent, to turn around and transform the impending judgment into a blessing. So, my friends, let us mark our calendars and note that on Saturday, April 14, we are going to join with thousands of faith communities across this nation and *Step It Up*. We will do so out of our allegiance to God, to God’s good earth and to generations yet unborn. We will do so because time has narrowed down to now. We will do so because our faith requires nothing less than the giving of ourselves for the sake of our world and its people. So be it. Amen.