

March 24, Lent 3C (Luke 13:1-9)

Are we the gardener? Or the fig tree?

by [Eric D. Barreto](#) in the [February 27, 2019](#) issue

It is almost instinctual, a reflex. We almost cannot seem to help it.

When people suffer, especially those we know and love, we rush to name a reason for their suffering, to explain away maladies as mere preparations for greater blessings, to minimize pain so as to make way for God's glory. As Kate Bowler writes about her experience after being diagnosed with cancer, "Most everyone I meet is dying to make me certain. They want me to know, without a doubt, that there is a hidden logic to this seeming chaos."

How much theological malpractice have you and I practiced when we have acted like an omniscient narrator, certain of the whys and wherefores of the lives of our loved ones? How much raw arrogance have we stood on as we swept away pain? How much misdirected empathy have we inflicted upon the lives of people we know and love because their pain was simply too difficult to hold? How much broken theology has sought to make orderly what has been torn asunder by the cruelties of disaster?

And somehow our misguided efforts to explain also spill over to people we do not even know.

From the vantage of our protections and privileges, we explain that poverty and illness are but the outcomes of a series of poor individual decisions. We plot the path of the storm due to people's sins. We explain the earthquake's epicenter on those we deem worthy of such affliction. A mentor and friend who sometimes uses a wheelchair once shared with me how alarmingly often strangers would approach him and, without knowing one minute of his life story, confidently crow that if he prayed—really prayed—then God would empower him to leave his wheelchair behind. Too often, we assume that sickness and its sibling death are but lines demarcating the cursed from the #blessed.

Why do we do this? To others? To ourselves? Why do we rush to a mind that explains rather than a heart that cracks open with tears? Perhaps because the world is complex and difficult to explain. Perhaps because we know too well that we will not always be onlookers onto suffering, but eventually we will be its victims. Perhaps because we actually do not believe in the transformative power of God's grace. Perhaps because sitting with pain is a spiritual discipline we have fled at every turn as we have created bulwarks around death.

Death, Jesus explains in this week's Gospel reading, is not purposeful or meaningful. But neither is it arbitrary. Death pursues us all, whether we fall victim to the retribution of empire or simply to being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Both empire and chance deal in death, thus it is misguided to look for some deeper meaning, some ordering principle in death's chaotic grip. Death is coming for us all.

But Jesus says one more thing: death is not as powerful as we think. Yes, death is coming for us all, but it will not overcome us—if we repent. God's grace blunts death's sharp edge. Repentance acknowledges that God can redeem, God can set right, God can make whole.

To illustrate this conviction, Jesus—who is very on-brand here—tells a story.

A man grows frustrated with a fig tree he has had planted to no avail. The tree will not bloom or produce. He is ready to uproot it and spare the soil from hosting its lazy roots. But the gardener intercedes, asking for one more year of nurture and cultivation. Give it one more year, he asks. There is still hope for this fruitless tree.

Luke does not narrate what happens a year hence. Does the tree blossom? Is it cut down? We do not know. What we do hear narrated is the gardener's hopeful intervention.

One more year. Just one more year.

Some of us have the posture of the man who had the tree planted. There is no more life here, we lament. Might as well move on. All we can see is what others lack, not the abundance of life and hope and pain and distress that they are experiencing. We see waste, not possibility. We see loss, not courage or resilience or persistence.

Some of us are more akin to the fig tree, dismissed by an onlooker as fruitless, hopeless, lifeless. The gardener sees possibility where others see impossibility.

What if the Spirit took our instinct to explain—to make sense, to order suffering like a shelf lined with books that won't abide by our sense of decor—and redirected it? The tower might fall. The empire might roar. But we are a fig tree, given one more chance despite years of not bearing fruit. We are waiting for the one who will cultivate us, nurture us into a flowering tree. The gardener has chosen to bring us to blossom.

What if the Spirit can help us realize that there is no order to the chaos of suffering save the overwhelming power of God's grace? Repentance is not a trade we make with God. It is a leap of faith that our deepest hopes will not leave our lips unheeded.

What if the Spirit can help us shift our instincts to compassion and empathy? When we encounter the chaos of suffering, our first gesture might then be to sit alongside those who are suffering, to join them in the ashes of grief, to eschew pity and opt for accompaniment in the trials of life.