

What God in Christ Assumed: Our Time

Isaiah 55:1-9

Luke 13:1-9

“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 round it and put manure on it.’”

This morning we have been dropped into the thirteenth chapter of Luke that begins, “At that very time....” Luke’s words made me wonder what else was going on “at that very time,” so I began to read backwards. At that very time, Jesus is drawing closer and closer to his death—even as we are, though we try not to think about it. At that very time and because he soon will be crucified, Jesus’ words of warning to the disciples and to the crowd are growing more urgent. Even though God will raise him from the dead, you get the feeling he is preparing them to live their lives without him, warning them about all that will threaten the church’s witness until he comes again. At that very time, Jesus tells the disciples and so the church to beware of the hypocrisy of religious leaders; tells them not to fear death-dealing politicians who can kill the body but to fear God alone. He imagines that they will be brought before authorities to defend the gospel and warns them never to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. He tells a parable about a man who spent his life storing up possessions in barns until God demanded of him his life and then Jesus implores the disciples not to worry about their lives, what they will eat or their body, what they will wear. He instructs them, as the first and the twenty-first century church listens in, to spend their lives striving for God’s kingdom, to sell all they have and give alms because where their treasure is, there their hearts will be also. He commands them to be ready at any moment like those waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet because they must be ready for the Son of Man to return at any hour.

Then, with an even greater urgency in his voice, he says to the disciples that he has come to bring fire to the earth and to divide households. Three will be for him and two against. Father against son and mother against daughter. Finally he turns to the crowd and says, “You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

It was “at that very time” that someone in the crowd asked if he had heard the breaking news about the massacre of Galileans in the temple who had come to offer sacrifices. Or what about the heartbreaking news of more death and destruction when the tower of Siloam collapsed and killed eighteen bystanders? It seems to me Jesus’ response to these tragedies is inexplicable unless you factor in the urgency and sense of “time left” permeating Jesus’ perspective “at that very time.” Rather than expressing compassion toward those who were killed or engaging in a theological discussion about why bad things happen to good people or good to bad, Jesus says to the crowd, “unless you repent, you will perish just as they did.”

In this way, Jesus assumes our time. Temporal time. Sequential time. The same sort of time that inexorably is bearing us all away. “Like all [human beings], the man Jesus has His lifetime,” Karl Barth writes, “the time bounded at one end by His birth and at the other by His death; a fixed span with a particular duration....” [Barth] The urgency Jesus experiences is the urgency of a human being whose days are numbered, whose “now” will soon be past and gone and whose future is but expectation or dread. Yet in contrast to the way we inhabit sequential time, as though our lives were one random thing after another and then we die, as though our lives were ours to do with as we please, Jesus assumes our allotted time, as well, our numbered days as time God has given him to be human in and with the urgency of the one and only human being who lived every moment in response to God’s presence and God’s will. Each moment, “each Now is a ‘now or never,’ ...is the time to awake, to receive or act, to speak or be silent, to say Yes or No...” in obedience to God’s will. [Barth]

Yet he assumes our time in order to accompany us who are lost in time, who are frittering away our Nows, wasting our precious and allotted days on hypocritical religion, on fear-mongering politicians, on causes not worth our lives, on amassing possessions and taking our selfish ease, on worrying about food and drink and clothes and security, on breaking news that keeps us in this season from doing business with the distance we keep from God and one another until it is too late and we have no more Nows. This Judge who loves us

will not simply let us wander aimlessly through our allotted days as though how we spend our time was of no consequence.

Therefore and in response to breaking news still (“Did you hear about the fifty Muslims killed in a mosque last Friday by a white nationalist?”), Jesus says, “What about them? I am here to tell you that unless you repent, unless you do an about face, unless you turn toward God and follow me in the limited time you have left, you will have lost your life no less than those fifty Muslims lost their lives last Friday.” “Jesus, the Mueller report is out! Three dozen indictments and counting.” “Do you think those who were indicted are worse offenders than all others living in Washington or Philadelphia?” he asks. “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will live and die under the same indictment.”

We, of course, do not turn, do not repent. We continue thirsty, as in a dry and weary land, where there is no water, wasting our every now, seeking gods that are not God, living fruitless lives. (Know that I am painting this bleak picture of our lives because it is Lent!) Nevertheless, the one who is our Judge is also our redeemer. The one who assumed our time as the Son of Man never ceased to be the eternal Son of God. So in almost the same breath, Jesus pivots to a parable that is known as the parable of the unfruitful fig tree. I think a better title would be the parable of the second chance gardener. In sequential time, a man comes looking for fruit and reports that, for three successive years, the tree has produced no figs. The man tells the gardener, “Cut it down!” But instead of responding as Jesus responded to the crowd’s breaking news (“Repent or, like the fig tree, you will perish”), the gardener tells the man to “let it alone.” The word is the same Jesus will later say from the cross: “Father, forgive.” He asks the man to give the fig tree more time—another year—a second chance--so that the gardener may tend the tree, dig around it, put manure on it.

Notice that the urgency in Jesus’ voice has been replaced by patience. I imagine it being the patience of the God whose thoughts are not our thoughts and whose ways are not our ways. Now from the perspective of eternity, from the perspective of the God whose time is simultaneous rather than sequential, Christ sees our fruitless lives not in snapshots of one “now” after another, not even in a sequence of years that deserve judgment; but he sees us whole from beginning to end, sees who we are destined to be in his love and continues to give us the time, continues to give us the second chances, continues to fit our random nows into the plot of God’s saving grace until we become wholly ourselves. This is how Jesus redeems the time he has assumed.

Luke is the only Gospel to include these sayings and this parable. Apparently more than any other Gospel writer, Luke is taken with repentance. “In fact,” the late Fred Craddock says, “for Luke the gospel is the offer of repentance and forgiveness of sins....God is the judge of our behavior and yet...God is patient...that [we] may yet bear fruit. Luke does not destroy severity by infusing grace, nor does he destroy grace by infusing severity.”

A storefront church named the Church of the Second Chance in Ann Tyler’s little book *Saint Maybe* comes to mind. Ian, the main character, walks into the church and asks to be forgiven. “‘What was it you needed forgiven?’ Reverend Emmett asks. ‘Ian couldn’t believe his ears. Was this even legal, inquiring into a person’s private prayers? ... [Nevertheless], in a voice not quite his own, he says, ‘I caused my brother to, um, kill himself. I told him his wife was cheating on him...and now I’m not even sure she was....So he drove into a wall. And then his wife died of sleeping pills and I guess you could say I caused that too, more or less. So it looks like my parents are going to have to raise the children. Anyhow, that’s why I asked for that prayer. And I honestly think it might have worked, don’t you think? Don’t you think I’m forgiven?’

“‘Goodness, no,’ Reverend Emmett said briskly. Ian’s mouth fell open. He wondered if he’d misunderstood....‘I’m not forgiven?’ ‘Oh, no.’ ‘But I thought that was kind of the point,’ Ian said. ‘I thought God forgives anything.’ ‘God does,’ Reverend Emmett said. ‘But you can’t just say, ‘I’m sorry, God.’ Why, anyone could do that much. You have to offer [repentance]—concrete, practical [repentance].’” Reverend Emmett suggested, in Ian’s case, that repentance would involve dropping out of school and raising his brother’s children. “‘But that’s crazy! I’d have to be crazy,’ Ian replies. ‘You’re saying God would want me to give up my education. Change all my parent’s plans for me....What kind of religion is this?’ ‘It’s the religion of atonement and complete forgiveness,’ Reverend Emmett said. ‘It’s the religion of the Second Chance.’”

It’s the religion of the God who, in Christ, assumed our time as his own so that we might be given every chance in the world, moment by moment, to turn in love toward him who first loved us. Thank be to God!