

## The Moving On God

Luke 13: 1-9

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David, Rachel and I just returned from a trip to visit historic amusement parks on the East Coast, riding many rides, including wooden roller coasters, one of them which was 100 years old...at least the design was...one hopes most of the boards have been replaced.

When I'm on a coaster, I tend to hang on tight, look towards the next hill or turn, not daring to look right and left even for those few moments when the car is heading up the lift hill. There is no time for imagination or dreams. There is no time to be led by anything more than the thrill of waiting for the drop or holding tight as you fall downward.

While it is great fun to be dropped and turned, forced left and then right, and in some cases floating in air, it is a relief when the ride ends. It is always good to get off, to be on your feet again, laughing and talking about the ride you just experienced with a friend.

On the other hand, I'm reminded of the disturbing image that occurs at the beginning of the movie, **Shark Boy and Lava Girl**<sup>1</sup>, where children are on a never ending roller coaster ride. You see the ride come to its end, the children desperately trying to raise the safety bar, and instead, being catapulted forward. "That's how to stop them from dreaming," the bad guy says with large smiling eyes.

Summer is a powerful time for God to work in lives. It is a time for dreams. Many of us are more ready than ever to ask if our vocation, our friendships, the ways we spend our time are taking us on a never ending roller coaster ride or if they are taking us to the place of laughter and joy, a place where we walk more closely with God.

The first verses of our scripture tell us that there are some things that are out of our control. The people tell Jesus about a group of Galileans who were killed by Pilate. Apparently this wasn't an uncommon occurrence. Jesus responds by saying "do you think that....they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?"

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<sup>1</sup> A favorite children's movie of mine which is based on a young boy's dream.

Then Jesus goes on to say, were these killed by the tower of Siloam in its random collapse worse offenders than those in all of Jerusalem?

Jesus refuses to let those gathered believe that these people died because they were somehow bad. Jesus also doesn't suggest that these tragedies are works of the devil. He doesn't even choose to talk about how evil has gotten hold of Pilate.

It seems that Jesus is uninterested in how death comes to us mortals or at least wants us to stop speculating so we have time for other dreams. If death isn't going to be the final word for Jesus, it certainly isn't that which is meant to control our lives today. Sin has no bearing on when death comes but it does determine our response when God knocks.

Repent or you will perish. Repent or you will perish.

There is a perfectly good word in Greek for death. It isn't used here. Here is the verb, to perish, to be destroyed, to be rendered useless.

Turn to God or you will be rendered useless...you will be put out of the way...you will be destroyed.

We are not "safe" from destruction because we are less sinful than another—because we refrain from doing evil, or claim the title of "Christians," or live as Americans.

We are not safe from God leaving us behind.

I don't mean in some time to come, when the sky is rolled up like a scroll<sup>2</sup>, as if that is the only time God will move upon the earth. We will be destroyed in the present, right now, unless we return to God.

Let me be clear once again. Luke is not interested in the question of who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. Luke is not interested in what God will do in the end times. Luke is not interested in death. Rather Luke is interested, Jesus is interested, God is interested in who is going to carry the gospel, God's way forward. As Jesus heads towards Jerusalem, towards the baptism of fire<sup>3</sup> that will burn bright from the cross, there is only so much time. The day of Pentecost is coming...

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<sup>2</sup> As in Revelation

<sup>3</sup> Luke 12: 49

Jesus is clear. If you are not ready when God comes, God will find those who are...

The history found in Luke/Acts tells us that the gospel was spread not by many of the people of the covenant, the Jews. The gospel was received by those outside of faith, by the Gentiles. Some Jews and some Gentiles were ready to receive God's new message. Luke tells us that Jesus gave people every opportunity to turn towards God who was moving forward. Every step of the way Jesus gives them another chance. But they have their ways, they refuse to let go, and God moves on.

The illustration that follows our scripture is of a woman who has been sick, bent over for 18 years, who appears in the synagogue on the Sabbath.<sup>4</sup> You know the rest. Jesus heals her. The leader of the synagogue challenges him—its not right to heal on the Sabbath. Jesus argues back, "Don't you untie your ox on the Sabbath and give him water?" When the argument is done, some remain angry, and others celebrate.

Even on the Sabbath, we must be about God's purpose, ready if we are called.

When I read the parable about the fig tree, I see in the gardener, a man, a woman, a people who, like the leader of the synagogue, will not let go of their ways. Understand that the vineyard is a pivotal image brought over from Isaiah. There, God tended to his vineyard, gave it everything it needed to grow, and it went wild. And God says, *And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard....I will remove its hedge and it shall be devoured...I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, ..I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.*<sup>5</sup>

God removes the vineyard's protection. Outside of a stump<sup>6</sup>, the hope of Isaiah, the vineyard is destroyed.

So the vineyard calls forth the idea that God will not remain faithful to the fields that go wild, God will move on to create a new people of faith...God will move on...

If we are to remain with God, then it stands to reason that even as God must move on at times from that which is not bearing good fruit despite all God has done, we too have to move on from that which is bearing no fruit in order to move with God.

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 13: 10 -17

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 5

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 6:13

Perhaps there are fields of thought that we have been fertilizing too long. Perhaps there are fears that have kept us on the never ending roller coaster.

To us Jesus speaks his parable:

“See here!” The owner exclaims. “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?”

Repent or you will perish. Cut it down or you will be useless. You will be destroyed.

When the gardener replies with the plea for one more year, the owner doesn't argue. The owner allows the man to continue to remain in his field, trying to get the unfruitful tree to blossom.

It is not as if God expects instant transformation. The owner will return in a year. Scripture suggests that repentance takes time, even suggests that God will revisit us in our unfruitful fields.

But Jesus is clear, as well, that without repentance, without turning towards God, without clearing out that which gets in the way, we will perish. Like the vineyard, we will be destroyed.

Did you hear the gardener say, if in a year, the tree doesn't bear fruit, the *owner* may come and cut it down.

Oh how hard it is for us to cut out of our own lives that which is barren. How we desire one more chance to make it work. How useless we can become to God and to the Holy Spirit trying to break through to us that we might build the Kingdom.

The owner's silence in the parable suggests to me that Jesus expects us to trust in God enough to wield the axe against our own folly.

How much more powerful are we when we swing the ax, when we don't wait and allow ourselves to be in a position to blame the one who does it for us, but when we choose to listen to God and obey.

How do we know that what we are tending is dead wood? How do we know when we've stopped dreaming and are instead just holding on?

It is a good question for prayer, journaling, and meditation. It is a good question for our talks with our mentors, for our Bible Study Share Time, and our personal scripture reading. But, I think, perhaps, it is often a rhetorical question, one for which we already know the answer.

I have a friend for whom her particular job was no longer a good match for her abilities. We attended a conference together and she broke into tears as she was reminded of her gifts, of what her work was meant to be. Even so, she said to me awhile after that conference, that God would have to make it very clear to her that it was time to move on...God always had. A few months later there were financial difficulties in the organization and the first way one in leadership chose to deal with them was to suggest by a personal email that my friend choose to resign because the day may soon come to pass when they must downsize. My friend was kicked hard that day. But long before that moment, she knew that she was fertilizing that which she couldn't make grow. God made it clear to her, painfully clear, that it was time for her to move on. It still smarts. Even so, today this faithful woman begins a new vocation, one for which she is uniquely well suited.

I am convinced that we know, long before our butts our kicked, when it is time to leave behind the unfruitful fig tree of our lives. I believe that the owner comes to us again and again and says "Cut it down." Each time we respond by getting mighty creative. We think of ways to make it work. "Give it more time," we ask. "Let me see what I can do."

We know when we are tending dead wood.

We know we are tending dead wood when we are spending our mind and soul energy thinking of ways to make it work rather than enjoying the fruit. We know when we are trying to argue God into believing in our cause. We know when we feel ourselves dying inside.

Usually we know because we have already spent a lot of time trying to get help.

Compare the fig tree to the mustard seed that follows soon after.<sup>7</sup> The Kingdom of God, Jesus says, is like a mustard seed that grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches. How easily the seed grows. No talk of fertilizer here. It is just a small seed, the tiniest in fact, that grows into a place where new life is born, nurtured, and raised up.

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<sup>7</sup> Luke 13: 18-19

While I believe God loves us a lot, gives us opportunities again and again to respond because of that love, I also think that it is necessary for some people to say “yes” when God calls in order for new life to enter into our world. While I can’t claim to know the mind and ways of God, it does strike me that maybe God is so patient because God has made us part of the plan and, until we begin to say “yes,” God’s Kingdom must remain a dream, a Glass Castle<sup>8</sup>, that, because of the sin we hold onto, can never be.

Our choice to give up the dead wood is a choice that allows us to walk nearer to God...be led by God...to be used by God.

Our choice opens us to the laughter, the love, the ideas that are created when we walk with God...our choice opens the way to new dreams.

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<sup>8</sup> Walls, Jeannette, *The Glass Castle: A Memoir*, Scribner, 2005.  
The image is provided in the book by the author’s Father.