

Third Sunday in Lent

WHO IS IN CONTROL?

Luke 13:1-9

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Analysis by Robin J. Morgan

1 At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2 He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4 Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

6 Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. 7 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?' 8 He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

DIAGNOSIS: Controlling Eternity

Step One: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Urgency*

In these verses, Jesus is leading his listeners to understand

that they do not have ultimate control of their lives. He tells them two stories, both of which highlight the urgency of their lives, neither of which gives any credence to popular ideas about the ultimate significance of our experiences and activities or our place in the universe.

In the first story, Jesus refutes the common notion (as common in Luke's day as it is today) that we can judge a person's relationship with God by the experiences of their life. It is not that positive experiences mean God is pleased with you and rewards you accordingly; nor that negative experiences mean God is displeased and is punishing you. Jesus clearly denies such correlation.

The second story highlights God's mercy to sinners. Even though the fig tree was barren, the owner allows four years for the tree to produce fruit. It is not our effort, but God's willingness to give us time to turn back to Him, that causes us to flourish and bear fruit.

Step Two: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Panic*

If neither our experiences nor our actions are the last word about our own lives, what are we to do? Our inability to control our own destiny leads to panic. We must find a way to regain control. We can't conceive of leaving our lives in the hands of another. Jesus tells us to repent, turn around and face our Creator. How can we turn back to God, when we know we can't do anything to earn God's love?

Step Three: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Out of Control*

The problem presented in these nine verses is that we are so focused on our experiences, on what we do and how we do it, that we see no answer to God's anger. There is nothing we can do. We are, indeed, facing our Creator, but we are alone and out of control.

PROGNOSIS: Rejoicing Eternally

Step Four: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Hope*

Yet the answer to our problem is standing in our midst: God's own storyteller, God's Son, the Chosen One. Jesus has already set his face to go to Jerusalem [Luke 9:51]. He is going to accomplish everything that was written about him by the prophets. He will be handed over to the authorities, mocked, insulted and spat upon. After being beaten, he will be killed and on the third day he will rise again [Luke 18:31-33]. This Beloved Son of God makes forgiveness for sinners possible through his own death and resurrection. He takes the consequences of our obsession with eternal control onto himself and gives us instead his hope, his peace and his joy in the Father's ultimate care for each one of us.

Step Five: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Turn Around*

Jesus gives us the ability to trust that God's ultimate love and care comes to us through Jesus himself. He enables us to turn back to God, regardless of our feelings of helplessness or despair. Accepting God's gift to us in Jesus is never based on our feelings nor our experiences. Instead, God asks us to open ourselves to receive His love and allow Him to direct us through this life and into eternity. We receive power from the Holy Spirit to live in a whole, new way—trusting that though we do not hold eternal control for our lives, we can rest in the care of the One who does.

Step Six: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Urgency Revisited*

Now the urgency of our lives comes from our desire to share this amazing news with people who are still panicking and searching for ways to control eternity. Jesus sent the disciples, as he sends us, to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. It's not an easy task and we will often end up in unfamiliar places where

we are again reminded of our inability to control our own destinies. Yet, we can continue to rejoice and proclaim Jesus because he walks with us, before us and behind us every step of the way.