

## **LAST CHANCE – NO CHANCE**

Series: Last, Lasting, Everlasting: Stories of Jesus on the Way to Jerusalem

Luke 13: 6-9; Luke 19: 41-44

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When I bought my car several years ago, I declined the offer to purchase an extended warranty. When the time came for the manufacturer's warranty to expire, I received notice that it was not too late to purchase the extended warranty. Again I declined. I was given several more opportunities to purchase this warranty, but I did not. Then one day I received a final notice. "Last chance to purchase peace of mind," it said. Who wants peace of mind? I passed it up. Since then, and I am not exaggerating, I have received at least twenty final notices. Alas, silly me, I am still without an extended warranty.

I fully expect that long after I have sold or traded in that car, I will still receive a final notice. It has become a household joke. Some final notices are no joke, however. While teaching a college course, I had a student who gave little attention or effort to the class and received a failing grade on every test and paper. On more than one occasion I warned her that if she did not buckle down, she would fail the course. I offered extra help and told her where she could get additional help. She did not care. Before the last regular test, I explained it was her last chance to make a passing grade possible. No effort. At the end of the semester, I told her she was welcome to take the final exam, but did not have to because she was going to fail the course. She was stunned. "How can this be?" she asked. I showed her how even 100% on the final would not bring her close to a passing grade. "My father will be furious," she told me. "What can I do?" "Nothing, but prepare for his wrath," was all I could say. She had missed her last chance.

One day some folks were talking with Jesus about some people who had been arbitrarily killed by Pilate and about others who had been killed when a tower collapsed and fell on them. They were of the common mentality that the victims had done something wrong so something bad had happened to them. It is the bad-things-happen-to-bad-people theology. Not so, Jesus told them. He was essentially saying that they were no better or worse than anyone else. They were just at the wrong place at the wrong time. The difference between you and them is that you still have time to repent, time to change the way you are living. Time, though, is running out. This is your last chance.

We have been talking about some of Jesus' last words, his teaching as he drew closer to Jerusalem, and his time grew short. We have said that his words took on a greater sense of urgency. We might call it last-chance talk. For the previous three years, he had been calling for repentance and teaching people how they should live. He told them the kingdom was coming and showed them what it was like and explained that they should do any and everything necessary to be included. Now he was saying, last chance. The ones about whom they had been talking had been here one minute and were gone the next. It could be the same for them. They had better repent because it could be over in a moment.

Then he told them the parable in our lesson this morning. The owner of a vineyard was inspecting his fig trees. One was barren. It was not having a bad year. The fact is that the tree had never produced figs. The owner was out of patience. "It's taking up needed soil," he told the gardener. "Cut it down." The gardener interceded. "Give it another year," he begged. "I'll work with the soil and fertilize it, and give the tree some extra tender loving care. If that makes no difference, you can cut it down next year."

Some might call this a judgment parable because there is a judgment component to it. I, however, think of it first being a parable of grace and graceful warning. Grace abounds. For one thing, we can tell by his tone that the gardener is skilled in his work and cares about the trees in his care. We can be sure, then, that the tree was planted properly and with care, and nurtured, and given the chance to thrive. That's grace. Secondly, the tree was given opportunity to produce. The gardener had tended to it for some years. Finally, when the owner was sharpening the axe, the gardener stepped between him and the tree. Give it more time. I'll work with it. That's grace.

This winter I bought a little indoor lime tree. It was kind of a nutty idea, but I saw one, and it caught my fancy, and it only cost a few bucks. I thought how cool it would be to grow limes right in the house. Well, I brought that baby home, found a nice place for it, and started looking at recipes that use limes. Then a leaf dropped off and then another and the limes on it began to fall off. Within a few weeks it had no leaves and no limes. Horticulture is not truly my thing so I figured it was not such a good idea after all and my mind shifted from limes to mulch. Robin, though, said that she would repot it, fertilize it, and figure out the right amount of water needed and see if we cannot get some more leaves and limes.

It is the parable retold and it is a story of grace. At some point, though, even grace has a limit. The gardener agreed that if, after additional care, the fig tree still produced no figs, it could be cut down. I was open to what Robin wanted to do, especially since she was doing all the work, but if it stays a leafless, fruitless stick, it will become mulch for the plants that want to grow. For the fig tree and the lime tree, it is a last chance.

Behind the story surely we can hear Jesus saying that I can only do so much for you. I can tell you the kingdom is coming. I can teach what it is like. I can demonstrate what it is like. I can invite you to be part of it. I can come in person to lead you into it. I can stick with you through all of your starts and stops, your moments of revelation and your moments of dullness, your times of faith and your times of doubt. But the time will come, suddenly and unexpectedly, when you will be in or out. If you still do not have figs by then, you will not be staying in the vineyard. I have given you multiple chances. This is your last chance.

This mixture of grace and judgment yields urgency. Last week Amanda spoke about the parable of the dishonest manager, saying that that rascal realized he better act quickly and decisively or he would be in serious trouble. A dishonest cheater could figure it out; Jesus was saying, why can't you? With this parable he is saying there is yet time. There is yet time to accept the love and care being given to us and do something with it. There is yet time - but the clock is running, and time will run out.

This parable should cause each of us to ask some serious questions of ourselves. Am I the tree God planted me to be? Am I producing the fruit God expects from me? Have I dedicated

myself to the tasks God has given me? There is yet time. We do not know, however, which chance is the last chance, so now is the time to get with it. Are you where you want to be, need to be, in your relationship with God? Last chance. Don't fritter it away.

## NO CHANCE

Riding on a donkey, his disciples, followers, and supporters lining the pathway shouting praise, Jesus eased his way down the west slope of the Mt. of Olives, across the Kidron Valley and into the walled city of Jerusalem. The crowd was in a frenzy, throwing palm branches into the road, cheering for Jesus and calling for salvation. When the Pharisees complained about all the hubbub, Jesus told them that if his disciples were silent, the very stones would cry out. It had to be a high point for Jesus.

If it was, though, it was bittersweet. I do not know if you have ever noticed this in this familiar story before, but outside the gate of the city, Jesus halted the makeshift parade and wept. They were not tears of joy. They were tears of lament. Looking at the city he said, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!" He said that the city would be destroyed without one stone left upon another. Why? "Because," he said, "you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God."

Notice that Jesus did not say these things would happen unless they repented. He did not say these things would happen unless they changed their ways. He said they were going to happen. The last chance had come and gone. Now there was no chance. In the language of the parable, the fig tree when given more time still failed to produce figs and would now be cut down. No more chances. The judgment had been made and the sentence given. All that remained was to carry it out.

I find this lament to be haunting. Think about the message. Unstoppable destruction lies ahead because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God. On that day Christ was pointing out that God was in their very midst and they did not know it. Can the same be said for each of us, personally, and said of our communities, our nation, and our world? Is it possible that we missed our time of visitation from God? There is devastation all around us and what I most often hear is where is God? Where is God? Maybe God rode right through town and we did not recognize him!

I wonder because here is what I see and know. Locally, statewide, and nationally we are wringing our hands over the opioid crisis, as large numbers, not just youth, dull their minds with drugs because facing life unassisted is too hard. Just in the Lenten period we have experienced two more school shootings, and just yesterday hundreds of thousands of students converged on Washington begging the adult world to please do something, and still we will not admit that we have a problem with guns and gun violence. The percentage of those suffering from depression and anxiety is rapidly rising, including among 12, 13, 14-year olds. Hate crimes have spiked dramatically in the past year. Oh, destruction is all around us, even as the numbers of those who consider Jesus to be irrelevant or unimportant or life-guiding faith in God to be outdated rises. It is not just the nones – those who check the box none when asked about religious affiliation – a group comprising of well over 1/3 of the younger generations. It is also the dones – older adults who have been practicing Christians who are now saying, "Been there, done that; we have moved

on.” Really? Is Jesus someone we outgrow, someone from whom we move on? Is it just a coincidence that as interest in Jesus declines, society-destroying habits and events rise? Or is Jesus saying, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But instead you will be crushed to the ground because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.”

If I sound fired up, I am. I am fired up in hopes of instilling a sense of urgency. It is hard enough to hear the warning last chance. It is devastating to hear the judgment no chance. Jesus has shown us the ways that lead to peace. It is incumbent upon us to pay attention to those ways, and to embrace those ways, and to teach and model those ways for others. How we treat each other, how we treat strangers, how we treat our earth matters. We should not wait for or expect secular society or governments to set those standards. That leadership should come from people of faith. And let’s stop pretending we are waiting for God. God is already here. We need to open our eyes and notice. We do not want to fail to recognize the time of our visitation from God. For if God comes and goes, we go from last chance to no chance.

Friends, we have been here before. We know, and this week will remind us that time and again, when given a choice, the crowd has shouted, “Give us Barabbas.” It is time to change that narrative and make sure we shout all the louder, “Give us Jesus.”

The gardener said “Let me work the soil and care for the tree and give it another chance to bear fruit. But, if after that there are no figs, you can cut it down.” These are some of the last words of Jesus. They are lasting words that lead to everlasting life.

Lord, have mercy on us. Amen.