

Lament Over Jerusalem

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Preacher: Bekki Fahrer

[0 : 0 0] Hi, Table Church. It is a truth universally acknowledged that when Becky has to preach a sermon at the table, they will give her the most difficult sermons to preach from. I'm not lying.

I had to preach on Ezra telling the exiles to divorce their spouses from a different ethnicity because God. I had to preach on Job, Job's friends telling him he was a bad person because he was suffering. I had to preach on Jesus' genealogy. Actually, that was kind of a fun sermon, but I did have to preach on a letter to the church at Thyatira from Revelation, and that was a hot mess.

You should just go read it. And now I have to preach this story about Jesus' interactions with some people that is really complex and should probably be four sermons, and I may or may not have done a lot of things to put off actually preparing this sermon this week, including whipping cream by hand and polishing some of my bedroom furniture with beeswax. Yeah, but I had to wrestle with it anyway and come to you with this. It's a story where Jesus is addressing the aftermath of a massacre, has a parable about a fig tree, Pharisees warn him, and there's some great Jesus sass in here, and then Jesus himself seeing himself as a mother hen. It was a lot. So let's just pray and then I can get you into it. So God, I come to you today with all my humanity, and I just ask that your spirit go in and through me and go before me and bring the words that we need to hear out of this time together.

So Jesus, throughout the Gospels, particularly the Gospel of Luke, where we're finding ourselves today, is on a journey. He's moving in and among the Hebrew people, touching people at the margins, healing those who have need, and teaching a different way, where he's confronting the religious power and the power of empire. He's making his way ultimately to Jerusalem, where his confrontations will come to a head and he will be put to death. And as we are working our way through Lent, we're finding ourselves in scriptures that are showcasing this upside-down one kingdom that he is creating. One where power is not sought and defended, but instead where injustice is righted, and privilege is called out, and liberation is preached, even though it doesn't always look the way the community expects it. And in interaction after interaction, Jesus challenges expectations and calls people to a better way, one rooted in relationship with God, itself and with others. And as we get closer to the moment where Jesus sacrifices everything, and in a way no one anticipates, except for maybe Mary of Bethany, some of these encounters get increasingly cryptic. And to get to the root of them, it's really helpful to apply a number of lenses.

And so today I'm going to do just that. I'm going to explore a chapter in Luke, chapter 13, through three lenses, sort of three through lines that we're going to try and trace in them to tease out of these scriptures a deeper meaning and to understand what is happening and where we go from here. The three lenses I'm using I'm going to call moment, movement, and momentum.

[3 : 26] So let me explain what I mean. When I talk about moment, I'm asking this question. What is the context that Jesus is speaking into? What is happening in that particular time? For example, at this time, Palestine was under Roman conquest and rule. And it was a time when the Roman Empire was trying to make up its mind about this land and its people, whether or not this is going to be assimilated into the empire or crushed underfoot. And the leader of Israel or the section that Jesus is in right now is Herod, who is a violent and dangerous man who is only interested in increasing his own power and cozying up to empire to cement this. When I'm talking about the lens of movement, I'm asking the question, how do the actions and the words of Jesus connect to the larger context of the Hebrew people and their interactions with God? How is this speaking to Hebraic tradition and the understanding of covenant? And when I'm talking about momentum,

I'm talking about asking this question, does seeing and reading these stories through those other two lenses impact the way our journey goes today? What does it say about the church writ large and our expression of faith in our context today? So what is the story? It's found in Luke 13, brief trigger warning. It talks a lot about like death and a massacre. So I want to just give you a heads up on that, but I'm going to be reading sections from the lectionary, which has Luke 13, one to eight, and then Luke 13, 31 to 35. At that very time, there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?

No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those 18 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? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

And 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. 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?

The gardener replied, sir, let it alone for one more year until I dig around it and put manure on it. And if it bears fruit next year, well and good. But if not, you can cut it down.

[6 : 21] Skipping to the end. At that very hour, some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, get away from here for Herod wants to kill you. Jesus said to them, go and tell that fox for me, listen, I am casting out demons and performing miracles today and tomorrow. And on the third day, I finished my work yet today, tomorrow and the next day, I must be on my way because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones, those who were sent to it. How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings? And you were not willing. See, your house is left to you. And I say to you, you will not see me again until the time comes when you say, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

See, four sermons, right? Am I right? But let's, let's try and break this down a little bit and contact and talk about it in the context of moment. Jerusalem is an occupied city in an occupied country where many carry on life as before. The city especially is evidence of a brutal occupation by a warring empire. The Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, is not someone who is like the benevolent leader with a conscience who tries to find a way to let an innocent Jesus off, as we seem to see in the story of the Passion of Christ. But no, he is a brutal man with a mission to show the people of Israel that they are subjects. Prior to this moment, he's raided the temple treasury, he's massacred the Samaritan people, he's executed many Hebrew people, and he shut down rebellions. And now it seems he has executed some Galilean men in the temple while they were offering their sacrifices to God.

And this desecration was yet another reminder that the Hebrew people lived at the will and whim of empire. So here, while Jesus is speaking to a group of people who have come to hear him, disciples and possibly some other hangers-on, some of the people bring up this slaughter and this desecration. It's possible that it was meant to trap Jesus, as often some of these conversations are, because if he came out in condemnation against the empire, he's setting himself up for death for sure. But if he doesn't show enough grace to those who died, he could be condemned, even more than he already was, by the Hebrew community. But Jesus does, as he so deftly does frequently, sidesteps this issue and calls out a different problem. An issue he'd been called out before, right? You remember the story of the man born blind. The Pharisees and the religious leaders brought this man to Jesus and said, hey, he's been blind from birth. Who sinned? Was it him or his parents? And Jesus neatly sidestepped that question. And while healing, the man made it very clear that what we attribute as judgment for sin isn't necessarily that. Disabling conditions, tragedies, losses, illnesses, these are not automatically judgments from God when we don't measure up. And here, Jesus interprets this moment in a similar way. When faced with the trauma of an empire killing people in a holy place of worship, the immediate response of the self-important Jerusalem Hebrews was to justify this punishment and in doing so, insulate and exonerate themselves. They were Galileans. The implication being that they were greater sinners and therefore deserving of this. It won't happen to me because I'm not like them. It's worth noting in this that Jesus was a Galilean or referred to one at many times, and so was his disciple Peter. In his day, they were looked down upon. They weren't the good Jews.

I mean, they were better than Samaritans, but they were definitely more sinful. But Jesus doesn't, isn't content to allow this implicit bias and scapegoating to continue. Instead, he calls out this false understanding of judgment and justice and makes it clear to his listeners that none of them will escape the might and retribution of empire just because they were better people.

The Hebrew people writ large are on this precipice. And unless something changes, the full might of Rome will come down and Rome will not discriminate between the good people of faith and the not so good.

[11 : 18] Everyone is going to suffer. His parable of the fig tree serves only to remind them that they're on borrowed time. They need to repent and not in just a, God, I'm so sorry for my sins kind of way, but in a change of heart and mind and action. He spent his ministry demonstrating this upside down kingdom. And in this moment, he's calling people to embrace this and change.

This parable of the fig tree is even more robust if you look at it through the lens of the movement of God's interaction with Hebrew people over time. When Jesus used the language of the fig tree, it had many connotations that the Hebrew people would twing on and recognize. If anybody had read the prophet Micah or indeed listened to the Hamilton soundtrack, you know that in the promises of God through his prophets, there will come a time when everyone will sit under their own vine and fig tree and will not be made afraid. Fig trees feature in the love poems of Song of Songs, in the talk of the promised land in Deuteronomy, in Psalms and prophecies, in Kings and in the story of Samuel. They are evidence of the blessing of God and the presence of God with their people and redemption. Conversely, the lack of fruit or the destruction of the fig tree, as evidenced in Isaiah and Jeremiah and Habakkuk and Joel, is this symbol of the absence of God's blessing and protection and even the capital J judgment of God. In Zechariah, the fig tree speaks to the greater mission of God.

That when things are made right, the people of God will not only have their own vine and fig tree, but they will invite others to join them under the fig tree, to join them in the blessing and protection and provision and presence of God. When Jesus evokes this imagery, the people of this tradition would place fig trees in this context. A fruitful tree implies blessing and presence and protection and provision. Lack of fruit and a decision to uproot could be jarring.

It can point to judgment being on its way. And perhaps there's also an even deeper conversation about covenant that exists in this space.

The covenant between God and their people. God met with Abraham, the founding father of the Hebrew people and promised that this childless man would have descendants too numerous to count. And he covenanted with old Abraham, you will be my people and I will be your God. I will bless you so that through you, all the nations of the world will be blessed. This covenant is carried down generation by generation among Abraham's descendants, the Hebrew people. There is something about blessing that is so important here. The purpose of blessing is to bear fruit. This Abrahamic covenant is a blessing so that more can happen. And perhaps in this moment at the fig tree, Jesus is calling the Hebrew people back to this covenant moment. That it's not just about judgment and uprooting. It's about remembering what you were invited to be. You were called to bear the fruit of the blessing of God so that through you, this blessing gets to continue to go forth. Jesus is here not just speaking to the consequence of what could happen if nothing changes, but reminding his followers of who they were created to be and what could be if things changed, if they changed. So what does that mean for us today? As we examine this question of the ongoing impact of these two lenses on our momentum in the faith, I want to look at the idea of empire versus upside down kingdom. We see Jesus active at the margins and calling out those who appease or at least are comfortable with empire. Those who implicitly justify atrocities and stamp God's will or God's judgment on tragedy. We see Jesus calling out the antithesis of this, calling people to repent and have a change of heart and mind and action, to be working against injustice, to provide for needs, to heal and restore, to make space and amplify voices of those kept silent, those kept unseen.

[16 : 12] To be upside down kingdom, not empire. From this, we can glean that we as people following the way of Christ should not align with power because power undoes the upside down kingdom of God. Aligning with power will compromise the gospel every time. Stuart Murray in the naked Anabaptists breaks down the transformations of the early church that had existed on the margins of empire and then transitioned to become the imperial religion under emperor Constantine. Between the third and fourth centuries, the church radically changed. They became landowners at the center of society, responsible for setting the moral and spiritual tone of the empire. Stuart maintains that the artistry, the creeds, and the teachings of Jesus dramatically changed in this time as well because Jesus, beyond the virgin birth and the death and the resurrection, was problematic to empire. He says this, there were understandable reasons why the imperial church marginalized Jesus as fourth century Christians struggled to adapt to this new social and political context. His teachings, which had been challenging enough for a powerless marginal community, seemed utterly unrealistic and inapplicable for Christians assuming responsibility for empire. What did it now mean to love your enemies? Matthew 5, 44? Or do not worry about tomorrow? Matthew 6, 34. How could such instructions be translated into foreign or economic policies? As the churches accepted and relished an honored place in a hierarchical society, the upside down, last will be first values Jesus taught and practiced were disturbing and distasteful. Murray goes on to say that the church leaders turned away from the gospel towards a more Old Testament leaning for teaching and inspiration because Israel as a nation had an economy to run, borders to defend, and a social system to organize. Aligning with power, with empire, comes at the expense of the expense of the expense of the expense of the gospel. And we have ample evidence of that in our country today. I'm sure each of you could come up with your own example if you want to right now. In addition, when we choose to side with power, our dominant motivator is no longer Christ or love or that relationship with God. Our dominant motivator is fear. Fear of what we will lose if power is taken away. Our privilege, our position, our pay, our status and reputation, our access to service. I mean, it can keep going and going, but that all can be in jeopardy if we challenge the power of the power structures we're aligned with. We see ourselves here. It is so much easier to scapegoat other people than to face the fear that we are living with. The fear that gives power to racial injustice, to discrimination, to control, to empire. And in the church, this can be just as pernicious. We shut down and isolate and shame people questioning power structures or pointing out abuses or who may just be different from our established norms. In most of those situations, the reasons behind what we do go back to preserving power and the fear that happens if that power goes.

Let's also look at the momentum going forward tied up in this idea of the fig tree and the blessing.

In this story that Jesus tells, the one that resonates with the Hebrew tradition going back in time, it is the fig tree that is not thriving, the unfruitful tree that gets the extra care. It's the tree that isn't doing what it's meant to do. It's not living up to its purpose.

And maybe we need to ask ourselves, what if, what if the privilege and blessing we're experiencing in the Western church isn't because we're better or more holy, but because we are not bearing fruit and need some extra care?

Maybe, just maybe, this is a reminder and a warning about the direction that we're going and the need to change our hearts and our minds and our actions.

[21 : 14] And in this story, when we see this fig tree, it's the gardener, not the planter, that asks for time to give the fruit tree extra care.

In light of this trajectory of fig trees being seen and the fruit being seen as the symbol of blessing and presence of God, could this not be a call for us to be an active part in cultivating this blessing?

Maybe this is part of that covenant where it isn't just dependent on God alone to make fruit happen, to bring blessing and bring fruitfulness that maybe we have a role to play in being fertile and being prepared to bear fruit.

What does this mean for each of us? These are questions we have to ponder and think about as we wrestle with these scriptures.

As we look forward to the second part of scripture, we can see a lot of the themes from the first part are echoing in the second. Themes of aligning with power, a call to repent and choose a better way, consequences for actions reflected, as well as a metaphor that connects to God's journey with his Hebrew people.

[22 : 38] Some Pharisees, who are generally Jesus' antagonists, come and they warn him that Herod is looking to kill him. And Jesus responds with a call out and a metaphor and a warning.

Looking at this through the lens of moment, Herod is a ruler in this region of Palestine, but not the entire nation. And he is not king due to a number of things, both one empire and also his father's will.

He's a man who has divorced his wife and then killed John the Baptist because John the Baptist called him out for it. And he is arrogant and demanding and the antithesis of what a leader of the Hebrew people is meant to be.

When the Pharisees told Jesus that Herod wanted to kill them, this probably was not a surprise. And in fact, Herod and his extended family have been an existential threat for Jesus his entire life.

So, I mean, go look at Matthew 2, if you don't believe me. But in all reality, Jesus had been fulfilling the role that Herod as leader or airsats, king of the Hebrew people, should have been doing.

[23 : 41] Working on the margins, caring for people who needed it, bringing healing and protection, and feeding the hungry, and drawing people to their God.

Jesus calls Herod out as a fox, and tells him he's going to keep doing what the leader of the upside down kingdom is meant to do, to serve, to heal, and to perform miracles.

And Jesus, using his prophetic language, says he's going to keep doing this until he dies. And then he uses some good old sarcasm to call out the hypocrisy of both the Pharisees and Herod, as if it wasn't possible to kill a prophet outside of Jerusalem.

In this moment, he is calling out the self-importance of Jerusalem and its people, and reminding them he knows exactly what they have in store for him.

Jesus then laments. He laments for Jerusalem and uses this metaphor of longing to gather them under his wing like a hen gathers her chicks. In tracing the movement of God's journey with the Hebrew people, wings, like fig trees, are an evocative concept.

[24 : 56] Multiple times in the Psalms, the concept of hiding under God's wings is seen as going to a place of shelter and protection and healing. It's referenced in Ruth, where a foreign woman found shelter and family and a place in the lineage of the Messiah, under the shadow of God's wings.

Jesus is offering this place and longing to provide it for his people in Jerusalem. But the people within instead kill and stone the prophets and those that are sent to it.

Jesus is calling them to a different way and acknowledging that they are not choosing it. And he warns them that the consequences are coming and they will not see him again until they acknowledge that he was sent by God to them.

Again, they are faced with a choice. The way of blessing and protection and healing are going their own way and reaping the consequences.

So, what does this mean for us? What does looking at these scriptures through these two lenses mean for the momentum of the movement of God among his people today?

[26 : 12] Honestly, I sit with these stories and I feel uncomfortable at how little has changed. We, as humans, lean towards self-importance.

We lean into power and away from the upside-down kingdom that works in the margins. We prioritize self over others. We choose the safety of empire.

It makes me wonder. If Jesus came to us with this invitation, with this longing to gather us under his wings, how many of us would have to weigh the cost?

I don't say this to shame any of us because quite honestly I can see myself in this as much as I can see our nation and the church writ large. But it makes me wonder about Lent.

What if, in the rhythm of the church, Lent could be seen in light of these scriptures? Instead of being a time to give up chocolate or alcohol or meat or suffer a little bit in remembrance of Christ or using this time as a time to reset balances in our lives, what if we could see Lent as a wing and fig tree moment?

[27 : 33] That we could intentionally take the time to analyze where we have aligned ourselves with empire, where our fear and our perceived fragility cause us to side with power and not be willing to be gathered under Christ's wing in this upside-down kingdom.

If we could set aside the time yearly to do the work of decolonizing our souls and our faith and our practices and set the intent for this work to continue throughout the year, where we could admit our need and use this time to prepare our soil, to prune what needs pruning, to do the work of spiritual declutter and weeding, and work on being fruit-ready.

This could be an individual pursuit, but it also could be a corporate time for us to evaluate church power structures and who we're making room for and who is absent at the table to see who it is we're serving and how we are acting in fear.

I think that in these scriptures, these really hard scriptures, Jesus is issuing us an invitation and a reminder to us about what is and what has always been at stake.

How do we enter in with authenticity to Christ's upside-down kingdom and join with him in renewal, in blessing, in healing and fruitful life?