Preacher and teacher Thomas Long writes about the little Georgia country church in which he grew up. The older people in the congregations loved to tell a certain story, which they laughed at and embellished every time they told it. Here's how Long remembers it: It was a certain Sunday night in October 1938. Evening prayer services were in full swing when a man named Sam, a member of the congregation who lived down the road from the church, charged into the prayer meeting trembling with fear and excitement. When he found the breath to speak, Sam shouted, “Martians are attacking the earth in spaceships! Some of them have already landed in New Jersey!” The preacher halted in mid-sentence; the congregation stared at Sam blankly. “I s-s-swear,” he stuttered. “I h-h-heard it on the radio.”

What Sam had heard, of course, was Orson Welles' now famous Mercury Theater radio production of *War of the Worlds,* but no one in the congregation knew that at the moment. For all they knew, the world outside was coming to a dramatic end. The little flock looked apprehensively at the preacher, but he was mute and unmoving, never having had a sermon interrupted by interplanetary invasion. Finally one of the oldest members of the congregation, a red-clay farmer of modest education, stood up, gripped the pew in front of him with his large, callused hands and said, “I 'speck what Sam says ain't completely true, but if it is true, we're in the right place here in church. Let's go on with the meetin'.” And so they did.

Spaceships landing in New Jersey? Signs of the end of the world? The old farmer sized it up, measured it against his view of providence, and decided it was better to be in church praising God than running around the cow pasture shooting buckshot into the night sky. With our modern ways of getting news, we don't have to wait for someone to burst into church to tell us of tragedy. Mass shootings. Natural disasters all around the world. Corrupt governments taking all their countries' resources and leaving their citizens to starve. And on and on and on. We see it, read it, absorb it all on a daily basis. And we wonder, what does it all mean? Are these events signs of the world coming to an end? Is the world finally paying for its sins? Is this God's final judgment on us all?

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, when along the way he met some people who were talking about two disasters which had occurred recently in the holy city. These were tragic incidents that left the people of Jerusalem rattled. The first was the massacre of a group of Galilean pilgrims in Jerusalem. Pilate ordered his police to slaughter the pilgrims and then to mingle their blood with the sacrifices they had brought with them. Luke doesn't say why Pilate acted in such a brutal way but it does reinforce what other historical writings says about Pilate's penchant for brutality. The second incident happened when a tower, perhaps part of the wall around Jerusalem, collapsed without warning and crushed 18 hapless Jerusalemites.

Jesus seized on the two calamities that probably were subjects of recent conversation around the local watering hole – one an instance of state-sanctioned terror, one a random accident. Both saw people snuffed out with little warning and for no apparent reason. As Jesus listened to the reports about the two tragedies, he detected in the people who were reporting them a kind of relief that they weren't part of the group that was slaughtered or killed by the falling tower. He also heard a note of judgment on the part of the bystanders, a note that implied that those who had died had done something to deserve their fate, that they disobeyed God and God had acted to punish them. “Not so,” said Jesus. Jesus implied that the victims of the killings and the tower collapse did nothing to bring about their demise. He characterized life as capricious as it is brutal. Jesus suggested that we must not equate tragedy with divine punishment. Sin does not make atrocities come, at least not most of the time. They just come.

After Jesus set the people straight and before he departed from them, he said something to them that was a bit of an enigma, “Unless you repent, you will die just like those people you just told me about.” Jesus turned the attention of his hearers from the gruesome disasters they had used to reassure themselves of God's favor back to their own lives. Jesus told his listeners to be grateful for their lives but not to get complacent because they did not know when their lives might end. Now, while they still had time, God was inviting them to change their hearts and minds, to see the world and their place in it a new way, to be thankful that God had a purpose for them.

Jesus spoke with an urgency that rings true today. He was on his way to Jerusalem, where his earthly journey would end. Jesus wanted his life, death and resurrection to count for something – he wanted people to wake up and change their lives because of him. Jesus warns that our lives could end just as quickly as did those who were murdered by Pilate, crushed by the tower or lost in all the many ways we hear about today.

Then Jesus tells us a story that helps us understand what he is saying. A man planted a fig tree in his vineyard. Year after year, he came looking for figs, but found none. Fig trees in Palestine were like our blackberries; they required little nurturing and produced almost effortlessly – a succulent, ripe fruit with a heavenly taste. When the master lost patience with the tree, the gardener begged for mercy and asked for one more year to get it to produce.

“Repent or you will perish.” Jesus' demand sounds harsh and difficult on its surface. But beneath the words are love, promise and grace. When we turn from the things that lead us astray and return to God, which is what it means to repent, we see all that God has done for us and continues to do to make us thrive. Psalm 63 evokes vivid images of God's care: God's faithfulness to us is like water in a weary land, like a feast of rich food, like a shadow to shelter us from the hot sun, like a strong hand that keeps us from falling. When we survive and grow and bear sweet fruit, this is what we look like: we bear the fruit of advocacy for those unable to speak for themselves, the fruit of love for those who think they are unlovable, the fruit of witness that shows others we follow Christ, the fruit of challenge to a world that too often values things and wealth more than people, the fruit of mercy where we would rather give blame.

It all comes down to one question, a question Jesus asks each one of us and all of us together as the body of Christ: How will you live the life you get to live? With no guarantee of tomorrow, how will you change the way you act in the world today? How will you bear my fruits of righteousness and justice to a starving world? This is God's judgment on us all: God showers us with abundant love, even though we do not deserve it. God gives us all we need to live a full life, however long or short that life turns out to be. Through the gift of God's son, we enter God's life-cycle of forgiveness and love and through Jesus, we receive the strength to start over when we have failed to bear fruit. God's judgment and grace go hand in hand to give us new life every time we awake to a new morning.

The old farmer in Georgia had a lot to teach us. When the world around us seems bent for destruction, what better place for us to be is there than in God's sanctuary? What better thing for us to do there than to praise God, for the gifts of his overflowing mercy and grace, made one of us in his Son. For he is the one who gives us all we need to bear the abundant fruits of his love.

Amen.

*Lent 3C*

*February 28, 2016*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Luke 13: 1-9*