

“Sight for Sore Eyes”  
in the “More Than Meets the Eye” Worship Series  
Sermon by Oby Ballinger  
Second Sunday in Lent  
Edina Morningside Community Church; March 12, 2017

**Luke 13:1-9, 31-35**

*At that very time there were some present who told him 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 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? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”*

*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?’ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”*

*...At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish 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 are 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 tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”*

Do you remember the Winnie the Pooh character Eeyore? He’s the little gloomy donkey who always manages to see a cloud in a clear-blue sky. Eeyore reliably points out everything wrong or that could go wrong. He only finds happiness when he realizes that the worst hasn’t happened—yet. Listen to [a bit of dialogue](#), with Eeyore talking to one of the other characters:

*"It's snowing still," said Eeyore gloomily.*

*"So it is."*

*"And freezing."*

*"Is it?"*

*"Yes," said Eeyore. "However," he said, brightening up a little,*

*"we haven't had an earthquake lately."*

Today, of course, Eeyore would also mention the time change.

He makes a compelling cartoon character because we all know and love someone who’s an Eeyore. Maybe it’s ourselves sometimes. I have had spells when there seems to be no good news, when life is tough and everything just seems like a downer. The news sometimes—these days—seems to hold more sorrow than joy. Division and gridlock, global famines, foolishness, insecurity, pandering, and spectacle. Given this, perhaps all of us can relate to Eeyore’s spirit.

Jesus comes up against such a heap of bad news in today’s reading from Luke. He’s set his face toward Jerusalem, having determined to follow his destiny even though the journey goes to that dangerous city. Along the way, people come up to him breathlessly, having just received the latest headlines. “Did you hear about those poor people in Galilee?” they ask. Ruthless Pilate had killed more Jews, then desecrated even the place of holy sacrifices with their blood. The people wonder if Pilate’s victims had committed

some terrible sins to lose their lives in such a way. They're looking for a reason behind some of the daunting challenges of this world: why corrupted power continues unchecked, why freak accidents happen (which we call "acts of God"), why good people seem unable to thrive, why the wicked prosper while the righteous suffer. They have found—rightly—much to be Eeyore glum and sad about. In light of this, some there might withdraw from community because the news is too hard. Others tighten their faces and hunch their shoulders, as though working harder is the answer. Others take in the misery of the world, yet their eyes turn red and sore from gazing on it without relief.

In the face of those same questions, Jesus doesn't offer many direct answers. Instead, he calls on his followers—in the face of daunting times—to push past what could be overwhelming dismay. In three different times and ways, Jesus calls for action even though the time be ill. He tells those wondering about the slaughter and a tower's fall on bystanders to repent, an active process involving turning around. He gives a parable about an infertile fig tree that may still bear fruit with further care. He models purposeful resistance to unjust leadership, which scorns the self-preservation that Pilate would use to keep everyone frozen in fear. Jesus calls disciples to act in the face of paralyzing challenges, describing what Sheryl Sandberg will later call "leaning in". This is not necessarily the frenetic motion of Winnie the Pooh's friend Rabbit, but it's a caution against the resignation that Eeyore sometimes represents.

Jesus reveals a clarity of vision and purpose that sees beyond the latest tragic headlines. Where others perceive only daunting obstacles, Jesus knows there's more than meets the eye. Determined, self-responsible action is the way forward, which looks like repentance, bearing fruit, and acting now. It's possible because Jesus sees beyond the surface of things as they are, to the work of God inexorably and patiently bringing good out of evil.

The New Testament scholar B. H. Streeter a century ago described how being in hard times can have a clarifying effect that reveals the big picture. He compares this to the ultimate things one learns in the presence of death, [writing](#):

*The summits of certain mountains are seen only at rare moments when, their cloud-cap rolled away, they stand out stark and clear. So in ordinary life ultimate values and eternal issues are normally obscured by minor duties, petty cares and small ambitions; at the bedside of a dying man the cloud is often lifted.*

[Streeter goes on to say](#) that Jesus and the disciples "found themselves standing, as it were, at the bedside of a dying world. Thus for a whole generation the cloud of lesser interests was rolled away, and ultimate values and eternal issues stood out before them stark and clear...."

We are in such a clarifying moment now as a church and a society. We have been at the deathbeds of more loved ones in recent months than we are accustomed to. In addition to Kathleen, John, Wayne and Skip, we also grieve the losses of open society, creation care, truthfulness, trust of neighbor, and care for the poor. Our hearts break at what we see, yet Jesus gives sight for sore eyes. Now more than ever, at the bedside of a world sick from fear, division and hate, Christ reveals the vital need for active, loving, compassionate discipleship. God looks to us, and to communities like ours which share joy through welcome and service. Such good things are not inevitable or guaranteed, especially in challenging times. The window of opportunity is not open forever—it is possible to lose a chance or squander a blessing, and the tree may yet be cut down. "Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability," Dr. King reminds us, "but comes through continuous struggle." Yet with urgent, passionate, visible and persistent faith God can open the way in us to breakthrough, resurrection life—even when least expected.

After all, the sick fig tree of Jesus' parable is not dead. Though its fruits have been hidden and slow in coming, the gardener recognizes possibilities in the next year. Fertilizer can bring to light the potential within this tree, within this current moment of grief and gloom. So on the way to clarity and restored sight, our gardening God invites us to use manure generously, with ourselves and others. Gather in communities of protest and praise, cook delicious food, laugh with friends, watch tender movies, make

something with your hands, spend time in exercise or meditation, create art. Do what the deep Wisdom that created you and that resides within you calls forth now. Do it lovingly, generously, and in connection with others. Do it for the sake of those we love deeply, and those we know only on a surface level. Let God work such goodness into us, as soil is even now enriched for spring. That is our way from heartsickness and despair to a quiet, enduring joy. Then, with each passing day, we will notice in others and ourselves the buds that endure through winter now swelling with new life. We will see tender leaves and flowers start to emerge. We will see branches take on new strength, and luscious fruit come to bear. We will, by the mysterious, timeless, beyond-us grace of God, be made into that tree at the end of Revelation, "the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." (Rev. 22:2) Even Eeyore will be happy there!

Let us pray: *God of all hopefulness, relieve our sore eyes with the sight of your rich goodness at work in all things. Stir in us the urgency of this time, that we may show the world your love with joy, welcome and service. Amen.*