

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
Parables on the Way to the Cross: Bearing Fruit  
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Jeremiah 8:8-13; Luke 13:1-9

The date was April 10, 1912 and the world was excited. They were excited because the largest and fastest ocean liner ever conceived and built was pulling out of port. The papers were abuzz about the wealthy socialites among the 2,224 passengers and crew. The ship was the crown of the White Star Line and was thought to be unsinkable. It was unsinkable because of its construction that would prevent more than a single watertight compartment from flooding in case of an accident. The confidence, or should I say, overconfidence of the owners and operators of the HMS Titanic led to removing half of the lifeboats and the captain to move at top speed through the north Atlantic, even on moonless nights when the lookouts in the crow's nest would not be able to see any icebergs ahead. We all know the rest of the story. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of April the Titanic struck an iceberg; its compartments flooded; the few lifeboats on the ship were launched half-full; and more than 1,500 people went down with the ship. Why is this story germane to us this morning? It is because both of our stories concern moments in Israel's history when the nation was moving full speed toward an "iceberg" that would doom thousands. Let me explain.

Jeremiah's words are directed to the nation of Judah. The "iceberg" that Judah was quickly approaching was the Babylonian Empire. Judah had narrowly escaped another iceberg about 200 years before when the Assyrian Empire allowed Judah to pay tribute rather than be destroyed. On this occasion, about 600 years before the birth of Christ, the nation was once again facing a large and powerful foe. At first, Judah agreed to pay tribute to Babylon and escape their sinking in the same way they had before. But for reasons we will discuss in a few minutes, the leadership of Judah decided that they no longer needed to pay tribute. And so, they declared their independence. Jeremiah the prophet was appalled. God had made it clear to him that if the people waited, God would eventually save them. He accused the Temple scribes, prophets, and priests of lying about what was ahead. He made it clear that people were saying "Peace, peace," when there was no peace. His declaration was, "Therefore I will give their wives to others and their fields to conquerors." Jeremiah saw the danger ahead, but no one listened.

Jesus' words were directed to his audience in Galilee. The "iceberg" that his audience and the rest of the Jews in Judea were facing was the Roman Empire. In the past six-hundred years the Jews living in Judea had only been independent for perhaps a hundred of them. In the time of Jesus, the nation was ruled by the Romans through people like Pilate and a few pseudo-Jewish princes. The people had freedom of movement and their religious shrine, the Temple, stood proudly in the middle of Jerusalem. Though there were occasional Roman atrocities, such as the one mentioned in our story, an ordinary Jew barely felt the presence of the Romans. Yet, there was a restlessness for freedom. There was a restlessness in Galilee to throw off their overlords. Jesus could see this coming and he warned the people of the consequences. He warned that if they continued on the course of rebellion, they would suffer the same fate as their ancestors had under the Babylonians...destruction and exile. So why wouldn't the people listen?

If we are to believe Jeremiah and Jesus, the people of Judah and Galilee refused to listen because they forgot who they were. They forgot that they were supposed to be those who produced the fruits of peace and not the desolations of war. We can see this call to be people producing the fruits of peace, in the use of the fig tree, by both Jesus and Jeremiah. The fig tree was emblematic of peace. It represented times when people

could sit in peace and partake of the sweet goodness of the land. And as a reminder, peace in Hebrew is shalom, meaning not merely the absence of war, but the fullness of life. The people of God then were intended to be those who brought the fullness of peace, of life, not only to themselves but to those around them. Unfortunately, the people forgot that peacemaking was their charge. Jeremiah chastised the people for rejecting the word of the Lord, dealing falsely with one another, and even doing things for which they should be ashamed. They had come to believe that because they were the chosen people, God would protect them regardless of their behavior and the choices they made. These same two concerns were regularly expressed by Jesus to the point where he agreed with Jeremiah, that the people of God were like trees that merely took up space and produced no fruit. The people were not being the peace-bearing people of God and the icebergs were right in front of them. Disaster awaited.

The question before us this morning then is what kind of tree are we? I ask this question for two reasons. First, I ask because our tendency as human beings is to assume that **we** are ok but **others**...well we're just not sure. We look around us, point fingers and say things like, "Look, those people over there are not producing any fruit." We do this because it is easier to point fingers "out there" than to take a look "in here." This was what the people around Jesus were doing. They were pointing their fingers at those who had been massacred by Pilate and those on whom a tower had fallen and essentially saying to Jesus, "Boy those folks must have been some bad sinners to have had those things happen to them." Jesus refuses to be taken in by that kind of speculation. Instead, he refocuses their attention back on themselves. He tells them that unless they turn around and move away from their relentless push toward violence and not peace, that they will suffer the same fate. In the parable he reminds them that they are empty trees because they have forgotten who they are supposed to be, people who bear the fruits of peace, of shalom.

The second reason I ask us to look out ourselves is that it was a year ago today that the pandemic was declared and that we closed the church to in-person worship. And it has been quite a year; isolation, lost jobs, half a million people dead...and we have been separated. Perhaps then it is time to take stock of what kind of a tree we have become during this pandemic season. So again, what kind of tree have we become? The answer this morning is one bearing good fruit. We are a tree that continues to bear the fruits of peace, of shalom. We bear these fruits in our work at Alcott Elementary school, with our AAIM program, with our Rejoicing Spirit's community, with our food distribution to families in Pontiac, through those of you who are packing food in Pontiac. We bear fruit through our support of Reverend Kate and the Faith Community Coalition on Foster Care. We bear fruit through our continuing work at being a fully inclusive congregation, through casserole club, through our support for Faith Kasoni in Kenya, where she works to prevent child marriage and Female Genital Mutilation. We bear fruit through the work of one of our families, who in conjunction with the Bloomfield Township Police Department, organized a Black Lives Matter walk to protest racial injustice and finally through our Matthew 25 Workgroup and all of our other committees that are prayerfully seeking God's leading in making our tree even more fruitful.

I believe that we have been able to do these things because Jesus has been and continues to be fertilizing us with his Spirit. I believe this is what Jesus desires for us...to be those who produce the fruits of peace...which is what is exciting about being part of our community, that Jesus always has more fruit bearing plans for us; more ways for us to bring peace; more opportunities to not simply to avoid the icebergs, but to sail full speed ahead into God's amazing future.

The challenge I offer you this morning then is this, to ask yourselves, how am I bearing the fruit of peace not simply through this church, but in my sphere of influence so that God's shalom shines on the world in which we live?