



“Living in the Not Yet”

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Luke 9:28-36*

It is such a treat to be doing the sermon today. I'm honored to have my Mom and her friend Frank here from Colorado visiting. I'm not sure, but I think this is the first time in a long time that my Mom has heard me in this role. I can't even remember the last time for certain—I'm thinking the last time you heard me preach was back when I was just out of Seminary and playing a temporary youth minister role in my home church over 20 years ago. That's a long time. I don't remember for certain what I preached on—so sorry Mom if this is a repeat!

So, it seems fitting to start this sermon with a story from my childhood. I'm not sure Mom remembers this or not, but a few weeks before my 11<sup>th</sup> birthday, just at the age Sage and Maya are now, I became enthralled with an elaborate plan of my own design to remodel my room and I planned to ask for this redesigned room as a gift for my upcoming birthday. Now, like many of us, I considered myself a bit of a mis-fit as a kid. Just to give you a bit of a picture of me at that age, when I was 11, I was pretty overweight, the second tallest in my class and I had the biggest feet. It was the era when polyester was first popularized and solid, brightly colored pants with flowered smock tops were all the range for girls my age. I also had a head of blond curly hair like Maya's; but in hot, humid Indiana we kept it short and I had yet to discover conditioner and styling gel. Between the flowered smock top, the bright-green polyester pants and my Don King-like hair, suffice to say that it would have been easy to mistake me for a very tall, wide, dandelion that had gone to seed.

Now, I am the oldest of three daughters, but I was the lucky one who had my own room while my sisters shared a room. My room was truly my little cocoon. It is where I day-dreamed and read books that transported me to other places and other lives. It was where I went when I felt left out and clueless how to get in. It was where I experienced God's abiding acceptance and love. In that room, I was normal and everyone else was different.

So, this elaborate plan of my own design for my room had mostly typical girl-becoming-young-woman stuff—some new furniture, bookshelves, curtains. But, the part of my elaborate plan that I was personally most enthralled with was the kitchenette. Yes, you heard me, a kitchenette. My vision for the kitchenette had a couple of cabinets, a two burner stove, a little oven, a sink, and a little refrigerator. I was so gripped with this vision that I spent hours alone in my room

with my Dad's tape measure, the Sears catalog, and pages of blank paper drafting out various options for the placement of my new bed, my new bookshelves, and of course, the kitchenette. A few years ago when my Mom was cleaning out the house I grew up in, she actually found the page where I had carefully and painstakingly drawn out my little kitchenette design—tucked away in her cedar chest in the basement.

Those of you who know me well will know that I don't exaggerate when I say that this elaborate plan of my own design became so real to me that it was as if I was literally already living in that room. This was my new reality. I could visualize it so clearly. It felt so right, so natural, so unquestionably sensible, so practical. I was absolutely certain my parents would think so too.

You can imagine how my world cracked open when my Mom and Dad, in a sensitive but non-dramatic way said that someday soon, if we had the money, I could pick out a new bed, new carpet, new bookshelves and furniture, but that the kitchenette just wasn't going to happen—at least not yet. I remember my Dad patiently sitting with me on my bed telling me how much they would miss me if I cooked my own meals and stayed in my room the whole time. He reassured me that someday I would have my own apartment or house and then I would have a kitchen, but not yet.

I'm sure I shed a few tears, but sadness isn't my dominant memory. My dominant memory is being at a total loss, feeling unsure of what to think, of what to believe in. It was my first self-aware, deep encounter with the psychological and spiritual territory of the not yet.

The passage from Luke that Erica read so well this morning is one of many throughout the Bible that talk specifically to this phenomenon of living in the not yet. As we consider it, we have to think about the author of Luke and his context.

Like all of the New Testament gospels, Luke was written a good many years after Jesus' life and ministry. We don't know much about him as a person, but there's a pretty wide consensus on a number of things.

There's reason to believe, both from tradition and from textual evidence, that the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts were written by the same person, most likely fairly late in the first century or early in the second, somewhere between 50-80 years after Jesus' life and crucifixion and birth of the church in the Easter story. It's been thought for many centuries that the author is the "beloved physician" Paul refers to in several of his letters. There is indeed a bit of a practical and scholarly flavor to Luke that would be in keeping with a first-century physician's lens on events.

Luke and Acts together are written in the style of the historical novels at that time, in beautifully constructed Greek. Jesus' status as the fulfillment of Jewish

prophecy is clear to this author—and he writes in such a way to give others insight into this aspect of Jesus' ministry.

But, the author of Luke and Acts is also steeped in the Greek culture, history and tradition and is clearly writing for a broad audience of second and third generation Christians, mostly Gentiles and not particularly religious, “away from Jerusalem” Jews.

Just as important, the author of Luke/Acts is clearly a citizen of the Roman Empire. Remember the passage where a group of followers ask whether it's right to pay taxes and Jesus takes the coin and shows them the image of the emperor on it? That's just a few pages later in Luke. That's just one of many examples in Luke/Acts intent on showing that Christians can be both good citizens of Christ and Rome.

In fact, a good way of thinking about the whole of Luke/Acts is it is written to the church living in its first self-aware, deep encounter of the psychological and spiritual territory of the not yet. Luke's audience apparently also had an elaborate plan of its own design—and looking back from the perspective of history we might call it a utopian rescue fantasy. The early Christians had such powerful and transformative experiences of Jesus that many gave up their livelihoods, sold all their possessions and moved into communal living situations, quite literally waiting for Jesus to come back and establish an earthly kingdom. But by the time this author was, in his own words at the beginning of Luke, “doing his own investigation and writing an orderly account” to clear up confusion about what really happened in Jesus life and in the early church, most of those early followers were old or long gone, and their children and grandchildren did have to make a living and maintain a home, having discovered over time that they couldn't live outside the system and just wait for the big rescue. The big issue on everyone's mind was, “How are we supposed to live consistent with both our humanness and its constraints, and the joys and obligations of our life-changing experience of the life-giving spirit of God?”

Ah, navigating life in the not yet. Sound familiar? What are our elaborate plans of our own design? Some are as mundane and earthly as the kitchenette in my 11-year old vision of the perfect room. But, for most of us, our elaborate plans are at the core of our aspiration: Our plans for our children and how they'll turn out. Our plans for our own lively and healthy old age. Our plans for growing old with our partners and spouses. Our plans for financial security. Our plans for physical and psychological health and vitality. Our elaborate plans may or may not turn out according to our designs. We don't know. In this life, we live in the psychological and spiritual territory of the not yet.

The little vignette in Luke 13 gives us a window into two very important things we need to remember as we live in the not yet.

The first insight comes in the way Luke sets up the parable of the fig tree. The people come to Jesus in essence asking about people who died in tragic circumstances—some in political and religious persecution and some who died in a tragic accident. The subtext of their questions to Jesus is this: did those people deserve this terrible fate? In other words, is there a plan of elaborate design that we can know and act within that will allow us to escape such terrible things? Are these people deserving victims of their own poor choices to live in conflict with this elaborate plan?

Jesus' answer is stark and not just a little harsh. In essence, he said you can't blame the victim—they did nothing to deserve this fate. But neither is there some elaborate plan that you can know and adhere to that will seal your safety and happiness. Only through "repentance" can you move beyond your fear of suffering and death—and beyond the fear of failure of your elaborate plans of your own design.

And what does it mean to repent? The Greek word used throughout the New Testament is *metanoia*, which in its context had quite a different nuance than "repent" does today where that word conjures up something between a TV evangelist, the slightly crazed street corner missionary, and a pulpit pounding evangelical exhortation. *Metanoia* in the Greek literally means a life-changing insight that comes from seeing things from a different, broader, more integrated and higher level perspective. *Metanoia* is the light-bulb moment, the epiphany, the blinding glimpse of the obvious that changes our understanding of everything else.

So, what does evidence of this *metanoia*, this life-changing insight look like? As Jesus so often did, he turned to the earthy, human, mundane aspects of life to illustrate the profound.

The effect of *metanoia* in the real world looks like the gardener, clearly seeing the fruitless tree as what it is, and yet rather than cutting it down, the gardener lives actively and consciously in the not yet, digging carefully and skillfully around the roots and spreading manure on the tree in hopes that it will someday bear fruit.

Living in the not yet is a tell the truth, get to work, hands dirty, working at the root of the matter kind of thing.

When we encounter the fruitless moments of our own lives, we are often up against the failure of one of our own elaborate plans of our own designs. The post-resurrection message of Luke is clear: living in the not yet takes work. When you see the fruitless tree, it is the time to tell the truth—this thing is not bearing fruit. But, then it's time get to work, not pruning and "managing" on the one hand or over-reacting and uprooting it on the other. No, the not-yet time is about getting down and dirty at the root of things, breaking up the soil, bringing in the fertilizer.

But it's also clear from the story that the outcome still is not certain. The not yet is real. The tree still may not bear fruit and there may be a time when it is right to give up hope.

It is through *metanoia*, through seeing things in the broader, more integrated, higher-level perspective of God's larger life-giving story, the resurrection story of Christ's triumph over the death that we can learn the process of living in the not yet.

My friends, where are your elaborate plans of your own design not bearing fruit? Hear the good news: you are not a helpless victim. But, there's also no elaborate plan that you can design to get that tree to bloom. Our hope—your hope—is in *metanoia*, in the life-changing post-resurrection insight that God is with us, God is with you in your disappointment, in your suffering, in your frustration, in your embarrassment, in your sadness.

Are you living in the not yet? It's time to tell the truth, get to work, get your hands dirty and go to work at the root things. And know God is with you, loving you and guiding you, and helping you know when it's time to keep looking for bloom and when it's time cut it down and move on.

And remember, you are not alone. We are all gardeners. May we always find support and love one for another in this garden, this Eden, this church as we live in the not yet.