

The Gardener

Luke 13:1-9

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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This week, I encountered a term I had never heard before. “Goblin mode.”

I came across it in an article in a British newspaper with a title that was impossible (at least for me!) to resist clicking on: “Slobbing out and giving up: why are so many people going ‘goblin mode’?”¹

What is “goblin mode,” you might be wondering. I wondered the same. I didn’t know much about goblins or how they might represent a “mode.” Well, here’s what the article said:

At some point in the stretch of days between the start of the pandemic’s third year and the feared launch of world war three, a new phrase entered the zeitgeist, a mysterious harbinger of an age to come: people were going “goblin mode...”

The term embraces the comforts of depravity: spending the day in bed watching [tv] on mute while scrolling endlessly through social media, pouring the end of a bag of chips in your mouth; downing Eggo toaster oven waffles with hot sauce over the sink because you can’t be bothered to put them on a plate. Leaving the house in your pajamas and socks...

Apparently “goblin mode” can refer to everything from not really caring what you wear or your personal appearance to neglecting your health to darker things like substance abuse and other nasty habits.

“Goblin mode is kind of the opposite of trying to better yourself,” said one person who had embraced this way of living. “I think that’s the kind of energy that we’re giving going into 2022.”

My first thought was, “God help us if that’s the energy we’re collectively giving off.”

¹ https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/mar/14/slobbing-out-and-giving-up-why-are-so-many-people-going-goblin-mode?utm_source=pocket-newtab

My second thought was, “I recognize this. I *see* this. This points to something very real in our culture.”

“Goblin mode” is a response to a world where people no longer trust old institutions, where we are weary of the corruption and dishonesty of people in power, whether it’s politicians or leaders of big corporations.

It is an expression of despair. Why bother trying? The world just keeps getting worse (or at least the version of it we’re being sold in the news!).

It is a reaction against the demands of online culture and the imperative to always be impressing people.

And it is fundamentally an expression of resignation in the face of a world where things are confusing, where there’s too many voices shouting too belligerently, where we can’t keep up with the fire hydrant of media, where we just can’t sort it all out and are tired of trying

It is nihilism. Nothing really matters. Everything is chaos. Why bother trying to improve myself or the world?

Pass the Cheetos. I wonder what’s on TV next.

Our gospel text this morning could be seen as the polar opposite of “goblin mode.” It is a call to take responsibility for our lives. It is a call to repent for the ways in which we participate in patterns that lead to death, whether physical or spiritual.

It is a call to bear fruit.

This is where Jesus ends in our passage this morning. But he takes an interesting route to get there, one that traverses the terrain of suffering and sin and how God is involved in the events of our world.

The text begins with an implied question. “Some present told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.”

We don’t know a great deal about the event that’s being referred to here.

At that time, it wasn't uncommon for Jewish revolutionaries to spring up now and then, and these revolutionaries would often offer sacrifices at the temple, perhaps seeking divine blessing for their cause.

We know that Pilate, the Roman governor of Jerusalem, was no friend of the Jews and that he would sometimes bring pagan symbols into Israel's temple to provoke them.

Were these specific Galileans reacting against this? Were they just there to stir up trouble? We don't know.

It seems that Pilate simply commanded Roman troops to slaughter them right in the temple.

But presumably when people brought up this bit of news, they were not offering Jesus an FYI. *By the way, Jesus... Did you hear about that massacre of those folks from Galilee?*

No, they clearly had something else in mind. They were expecting Jesus to explain *why* such an awful thing could have happened. They wanted to know what it meant.

Jesus' responds in an unexpected way. "Do you think they were worse sinners than anyone else?"

He even adds another story of suffering to the one presented to him. What about those eighteen people that the Tower of Siloam fell on?

The Tower of Siloam was in a region of central Jerusalem. Here, the devastation seems more tragic than malicious—it seems that a building had simply fallen and crushed a number of people.

"Were they worse sinners than anyone else in Jerusalem?" Jesus asks.

Did God orchestrate that tower to fall on those precise people at that precise moment because their misdeeds demanded it? Is suffering a consequence for sin?

The answer would have been rather obvious to Jesus' hearers.

Well, um, yeah. That's kind of how it works, right? What else would we think? Isn't that the way God has set things up?

There are many places we could turn in the Bible for evidence, not least the basic commandment that echoes throughout the Torah.

Keep my commandments that it may go well with you in the land. Obedience = blessing; disobedience = curses. Simple.

At this point, we might be tempted to say, well we're not that naïve. We know that things are more complicated than that!

But who among us hasn't encountered something in our own lives and asked, even if only in the privacy of our own minds? *Why is this happening to me? What did I do? Am I being punished for something?*

Or who among us hasn't seen some natural disaster in some desperate part of the world and wondered, *Why them? What did they do?*

Each of us—whether we are “religious” or not— seems to have this assumption that the world ought to work a certain way, that there ought to be a kind of moral symmetry between our behaviour and what we “get.”

It is an expectation that is as peculiar as it is commonplace. A quick glance at the world around us ought to make this plain enough. Bad things are always happening to relatively “good” people.

Catastrophic tragedies seem to strike in arbitrary and unpredictable ways. Disease indiscriminately strikes down the young, the old, and those in between. The innocent suffer all the time and all over the place.

If one were to look only at empirical evidence, the idea that bad things happen to bad people and good things happen to good people is absurd.

Those who take refuge in “goblin mode” because the world is just too awful and chaotic a place should probably read a bit more history!

Yet we expect the world to make moral sense! And we, like the people in our text, expect Jesus to know what we expect and to validate it!

But Jesus doesn't validate this expectation.

He doesn't say, *Ah, yes, well let me tell you about those particular Galileans... They were a nasty bunch and they got what was coming to them...*

He doesn't say, *Those eighteen people crushed by the falling tower? You should have seen what their private lives looked like!*

Jesus, as he so often does, changes the script.

No, I tell you...

No, these people's suffering was not because they were any better or worse sinners than anyone else. No, you can't make those explicit connections and you shouldn't try.

There is sin and there is suffering in the world, but your task is not to try to connect all the dots.

Jesus redirects his hearers' attention away from abstract speculation about the meaning of this or that event and toward the more pressing matter of... *what about you?*

Yes, horrible things happen, Jesus says. Yes, there is suffering and pain and injustice. Yes, there are people whose wills seem perpetually bent away from God's purposes and plans for the world. Yes, people continue to refuse the way that leads to peace. Yes, the world can be full of chaos and pain and uncertainty of every kind.

But what about you?

Which way are you going? What is the path your life is taking? Are you oriented properly toward God? Are you choosing the things that lead to life and peace and flourishing? Or are you contributing to the things that lead to death?

Jesus, as always, makes things personal. What about you?

To drive the point home, Jesus pivots to a story about a fig tree in a vineyard, about a gardener looking for fruit.

Jesus is fond of agricultural metaphors. He seems to always be talking about vineyards and fruit and vines and branches.

Here in Luke 13, focus is on a solitary fruitless fig tree. This barren fig tree will be given a year, but if it doesn't start to produce fruit, it will be cut down.

The point—in this parable, and throughout the whole of Scripture—is fruit.

As people of Christian faith, we are not given the option of just checking out and going into goblin mode. The world needs our best efforts, our most creative energies, our most determined love, our most honest repentance, our most courageous commitment to what is good, true, and beautiful.

There are things in our world that require our tending.

Ourselves. Our physical selves, our spiritual selves, our social selves.

Our families. Our marriages, our relationships with our kids.

Our friendships and social circles.

Our churches, whether local, regional, or beyond.

We could zoom out even further to the broader institutions of our world.

Democracy, civility, the values of care and dignity and compassion that that the last few years seem to somehow have eroded.

None of these things—from the personal to the global—exist without the effort, care, cultivation of human beings.

Each of these require time, energy, care, thought, attention.

But they also require proper perspective, an acknowledgment that God is God and we are not.

Our Lenten theme this year is taken from Isaiah 55:8:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.

Throughout the season of Lent, we are seeking to be reoriented from our ways to God's ways.

“Our ways” tend to run down two destructive tracks.

Either we drift off toward the despair, apathy and irresponsibility represented by terms like “goblin mode” or we veer off in the opposite direction and frantically try to earn, to prove, to justify, to *do enough* for God.

Both are dead ends. Both do damage to our souls (we become either slobs or slaves). Neither are what we were created for.

Instead, we seek God's ways—receiving what we have been given, acknowledging our limitations, tending those things in our lives that God has given us to tend.

I was struck by a question as I read the parable of the fig tree this week. *Which character represents God in this story?*

I think many of us instinctively read Jesus' parable and assume that God is the owner of the vineyard.

This makes sense. God is the "owner" of all that is, God is the one who planted the vineyard and the fig tree. God is responsible for its fate.

But I suspect that we also can't help but imagine God as the gardener. God is the one who sets the first humans in a garden, after all, and tells them to be fruitful.

The image of a vineyard recurs throughout the OT—this idea that God has planted his people in a world designed for flourishing.

And doesn't Mary mistake Jesus for the gardener when he appears to her after his resurrection? We probably shouldn't read *too* much into that, but still... it's interesting. And suggestive.

This week, I imagined the conversation between the owner of the vineyard and the gardener as something like a conversation within the mind of God.

They're not bearing the fruit I've created them for! Time to cut down the trees.

But I love them so. What if I cultivate the soil and add a bit fertilizer? What if tend them in such a way as to call forth the best in them?

But I've been waiting so long! Why are they wasting what they've been given?

But what if I give them some more time? I know that fruit is possible.

This is probably not the decisive, officially approved interpretation of this passage, but parables are after all more like poetry than a theology textbook.

And who knows? Maybe Jesus is being deliberately, possibly even playfully ambiguous in this passage.

Ultimately, God is the gardener who tends his people. God is the one who makes us fruitful. And the Christian life is not one of frantic striving but of grateful responding.

Michael Curry, sums it up well in his commentary on this passage, and I close with his words:

The working out of God's kingdom is not ours to figure out. Our task is to labor, without having all the answers... to witness and then wait, to take our best step and leave the rest to God. We labor now for a future we are not meant to control...

No statement of faith says all that could be said; no prayer fully expresses our faith; no pastoral visit brings wholeness; no program accomplishes the church's mission; no set of goals and objectives includes everything that needs to be done. We plant the seeds that will one day grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise...

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. Being freed from managing the results of our actions enables us to do something, and do it well.²

We labour now for a future we are not meant to control.

And we do so confident that the God who desires fruit is also the Gardener who tends the soil of our world, our church, and our lives.

May God help us to be fruitful.

Amen.



² Michael B. Curry, Commentary on Luke 13:1-9 in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 2* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 97.