

State Of The Union

*I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last
(John 15:16. NRSV)*

“Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.” ’ (Luke 13:8-9. NRSV)

*¹⁹If you do forget the Lord your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. ²⁰Like the nations that the Lord is destroying before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the Lord your God.
(Deuteronomy 8:19-20. NRSV)*

State Of The Union: The Church

May 30th, 2010

Luke 13:6-9

Deuteronomy 8:11-20

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Introduction:

This morning we are going to be discussing the State of our Union. We are, as always, going to root ourselves in Scripture but we are going to also attempt to utilise wisdom and discernment to find ourselves in some revealed cycles that can be used to predict the next season of God’s activity within the church. You may remember that a few years ago I preached a message here called “APGARing The Church”. The APGAR test is used by hospitals all over the country to assess a new born baby against a set of recognised standards. If a baby’s appearance at birth falls outside of certain desired parameters there is a set protocol that governs the response of the health care professionals attending that birth. Biblical prophecy functions along these same lines. It is a popular misconception that Biblical prophets function like fortune tellers or like the Greek Oracle of Delphi. They don’t. The vast majority of prophecy is really Spiritual discernment against revealed protocol. What I mean by that is that prophets like Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah etc. studied the Word of God. They read Moses and they carefully examined the conditions of the covenant. Believing that God is faithful to his word, they then applied those standards with the guidance of the Holy Spirit to the contemporary situations of the people of God under covenant and they stated reasonable conclusions about the next phase of God’s activity among them. Let me show you a quick example so that you can track with me. In the Book of Deuteronomy it says:

¹⁷For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, ¹⁸who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. ¹⁹You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:17-19. NRSV)

So the Bible says that God is not partial, God takes no bribes, God is kind and considerate towards widows, orphans and immigrants. It goes on to say, if God is like that, you must be like that; you must mimic the character of God in your dealings with one another. There are many other stipulations and conditions like this as well. Then at the end of all these conditions and stipulations we find a statement of potential consequences:

If you will only obey the Lord your God, by diligently observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth; ²all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the Lord your God:

³ Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field.

⁴ Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your livestock, both the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock....

⁷ The Lord will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you...

¹⁰All the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you.

¹¹The Lord will make you abound in prosperity...

¹³The Lord will make you the head, and not the tail...

¹⁵ **But if you will not obey the Lord your God** by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you:

¹⁶ Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field.

¹⁸ Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, the increase of your cattle, and the issue of your flock. ...

²⁰ The Lord will send upon you disaster, panic, and frustration in everything you attempt to do...

²¹The Lord will make the pestilence cling to you until it has consumed you ...

²²The Lord will afflict you with consumption, fever, inflammation, with fiery heat and drought, and with blight...

²⁵ The Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies... ²⁸The Lord will afflict you with madness, blindness, and confusion of mind... ³⁰You shall become engaged to a woman, but another man shall lie with her....

³⁶The Lord will bring you, and the king whom you set over you, to a nation that neither you nor your ancestors have known, where you shall serve other gods, of wood and stone.... ⁴¹You shall have sons and daughters, but they shall not remain yours, for they shall go into captivity. ... ⁴⁵ All these curses shall come upon you, pursuing and overtaking you until you are destroyed, **because you did not obey the Lord your God**, by observing the commandments and the decrees that he commanded you. ...

⁴⁹The Lord will bring a nation from far away, from the end of the earth, to swoop down on you like an eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, ⁵⁰a grim-faced nation showing no respect to the old or favour to the young....

⁵³ **In the desperate straits to which the enemy siege reduces you, you will eat the fruit of your womb**, the flesh of your own sons and daughters whom the Lord your God has given you....

⁶⁰He will bring back upon you all the diseases of Egypt, of which you were in dread, and they shall cling to you....

⁶²Although once you were as numerous as the stars in heaven, you shall be left few in number, because you did not obey the Lord your God. ⁶³And just as the Lord took delight in making you prosperous and numerous, so the Lord will take delight in bringing you to ruin and destruction... (Deuteronomy 28:1-63. NRSV)

These words were spoken 3500 years ago and they became the basis for every true prophesy that has been uttered in the house of God ever since. Think about this for just a second. 3500 years

ago God said through Moses that a time would come, if the Jews became arrogant and forgot the Lord that their enemies would lay siege to their city and the siege would be so terrible that mothers would eat their own children. Do you know that in A.D. 70, 1500 years after this was written, Josephus, the Roman Jewish historian records that in the siege that Rome maintained around Jerusalem, famine became so intense within the city walls that mothers were forced to eat their own still born babies? This set of protocols has been enacted with FRIGHTENING PRECISION over and over again over the course of history. The people of God have been sent into exile three different times, seemingly disappearing from history only to reappear as a miracle of God. This protocol is revelation; it is reliable and it is trustworthy. Because God is merciful he always provides attentive men and women with warnings so that they can repent in advance of the consequences that will surely befall them. This is exactly what the Old Testament prophets did. Amos, having STUDIED the covenant stipulations and being VERY FAMILIAR with the revealed protocols said:

Thus says the Lord:
For three transgressions of Israel,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;
because they sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals—
⁷they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,
and push the afflicted out of the way;
father and son go in to the same girl,
so that my holy name is profaned;
⁸they lay themselves down beside every altar
on garments taken in pledge;
and in the house of their God they drink
wine bought with fines they imposed. (Amos 2:6-8. NRSV)

Amos says: “Everything we are doing right now was EXPRESSLY forbidden in the Word of God. Therefore, it seems very clear to me through the guidance of the Holy Spirit that we will suffer the consequences called for in the divinely revealed protocols. We should expect to see hardship, defeat, terrible trials and likely famine and exile.” Indeed later in the very next chapter he says:

Does disaster befall a city,
unless the Lord has done it?
⁷Surely the Lord God does nothing,
without revealing his secret
to his servants the prophets.
⁸The lion has roared;
who will not fear?

The Lord God has spoken;
who can but prophesy? (Amos 3:6-8. NRSV)

Amos says: “When this happens, as surely it must, know that we were warned. The lion roars, the Holy Spirit convicts and when that happens, any idiot could make this prophecy! The Word of God has spoken friends!” Prophecy is not rocket science church! The protocols are timeless, the promises are sure, the Holy Spirit always warns in advance because God’s will is that none should perish but that all men should come to repentance. If you know the Word of God, if you are led by the Holy Spirit than you can prophesy, you don’t have to camp out in a cave inhaling methane gas in order to speak a word from God! The Lord has spoken, who can but prophesy? We are going to do a little bit of that today, so buckle up. We are going to see some things in the Word of God that STAND, that are TIMELESS and that are reliable because God is faithful to his word. Then we need only exercise Holy Spirit wisdom to anticipate the nature of God’s interaction with his people in the season that lies before us. Open your Bibles to Luke chapter 13.

Protocol #1: Stinkfruit and Extended Barrenness

In Luke 13 Jesus reprises an old Biblical tune, let me read it to you:

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. ⁷So 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?” ⁸He replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”’ (Luke 13:6-9. NRSV)

This parable does not stand alone in Scripture in teaching the response of God to extended barrenness among his people. Indeed that is a major theme of Biblical prophecy. Isaiah said:

My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.
²He dug it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watch-tower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
he expected it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.

³And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem

and people of Judah,
judge between me
and my vineyard.
⁴What more was there to do for my vineyard
that I have not done in it?
When I expected it to yield grapes,
why did it yield wild grapes?

⁵And now I will tell you
what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge,
and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall,
and it shall be trampled down.
⁶I will make it a waste;
it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns;
I will also command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it.

⁷For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are his pleasant planting;
he expected justice,
but saw bloodshed;
righteousness,
but heard a cry! (Isaiah 5:1-7. NRSV)

This story that Jesus tells is practically identical to the one in Isaiah. There is very little new in the Bible friends, because it is the same God and the same world on the left side of your Bible as on the right side, amen? Amen. So Jesus is singing an old song here saying that when the people of God go through extended seasons of barrenness or when they produce bad fruit instead of good fruit for a period of time, God MESSES with the vineyard. He dumps MANURE on it and he DIGS IT UP.

The protocol in plain English then is this, if the people of God produce bad fruit or no fruit, God will extend:

- i. A brief season of mercy, that will be characterised by chastisement and hardship designed to reinvigorate the house.**

If the house does not respond, it is cut off and rejected. That's the protocol, it's in the Word of God, left side and right side, because God doesn't change.

So where are we on that timeline friends? Where do we locate the Evangelical church on that timeline? With spiritual discernment I believe it is fairly obvious that we are deep into a long season of stinkfruit and barrenness within the Evangelical church in North America. I am not the only one who recognises this. Bill Hybels, who created the seeker sensitive movement that, under one name or another, has dominated the Evangelical world for the last 25 years recently released a report called “Reveal” where he had the guts to say that his approach has not worked, it is a failure. It does a decent job of getting people to go to church but it produces very little in terms of real fruit. Very few legitimate conversions, very little character growth in those who claim to know Jesus. Closer to home a friend of mine was on staff at the fastest growing Evangelical church in Canada. He told me that they had done their own internal “Reveal” and discovered the same. They style themselves as a church for people who aren’t into church, whatever that means, and their internal narrative is that they are good at reaching out to “unchurched” people, whatever that means, and bringing them to saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. So, they had the courage to test that. Testing the veracity of the story that you tell yourself to justify your existence takes courage, I’ll give them that. What their test revealed though was disconcerting. They discovered that less than 1% of the people that attended their church actually fit their internal narrative. The vast majority of the people that had joined their church in the last 5 years were highly churched, disgruntled Christians who abandoned their small churches because they couldn’t compete with the high level of service and professionalism that this new church was offering. They weren’t reaching unchurched seekers at all, they were reaching fat, self indulgent, Christians who abandoned their tribes in search of greener grass. That’s a pretty fair description of stink fruit if I ever heard one.

Back when I was in Bible school they used to refer to that as “shuffling the sheep”. It looks like fruit, but it’s not. The Evangelical church has mastered the art of stink fruit. You can buy books on it, go to conferences on it and you can choke to death on it for just 5 easy payments of \$19.99. Frankly, I’m sick of it. I refuse to have anything to do with it. The Amos in me can feel the shift in the wind as God’s hand of discipline prepares to visit his people and I want to duck.

So what can we reasonably forecast as characterising the next stage of God’s interaction with the Evangelical church? If God is faithful to his word then we should expect **a short season of intense discipline and adjustment.**

Right? The point of this parable after all, is fairly obvious: God is merciful and will provide one last opportunity for his persistently unfruitful tree. He will shock it with manure and dig a trench around it to maximise its opportunity to reinvigorate and become a useful occupant of the vineyard. But this season will not be indefinite, because God is highly invested in the production of harvest. If we won't help, he will shortly give our space to someone else.

I believe that we are seeing this even now. Those who are fruitful will be given more land and more space so that they can produce more harvest. Those who are not, even what they have will be taken from them and given to others. I know this doesn't sound nice from a Canadian perspective, but this does sound like Jesus doesn't it? Jesus said:

For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. (Matthew 25:29. NRSV)

We must resist the urge to be Canadian in this season or we will find ourselves fighting against God. The Canadian way, which is a good way in most times and seasons, is to take from the rich and give to the poor. This is generally a good social policy, provided it is not taken to extremes, but in the Kingdom Economy, there are occasional interruptions to this. Now remember, the Bible COMMANDS tithes be taken for support of the poor, so please understand what I am about to say in a SPIRITUAL WAY. There are times when God lets a church become poor because he is in the process of removing their place in the vineyard. We need to be wise to that. Not always; sometimes churches are poor because of where they serve, they serve in neighbourhoods that cannot support a fully orbbed ministry, those churches we should give generously to, but sometimes churches are poor because God is killing them. He is cutting them down and preparing to give their nutrients to someone who will make better use of them. When a denominational strategy lacks discernment of this reality, when their response is ALWAYS to ask fruitful churches to subsidize dying churches, then it may find itself fighting against God. Remember this, friends, one generation of self centred seniors can kill a church. That is why I was so overcome with gratitude when I attempted to thank our own seniors last month for their selflessness and wisdom. You've all heard about this now, no doubt, how pastor had a bad case of cry baby-itus at the seniors' lunch when trying to say a simple thank you, but that is because I understand from Scripture that ONE GENERATION of selfish seniors can kill a church, we are only here today because we didn't have that generation. We had a generation of selfless and wise

seniors by the grace and mercy of God. Likewise one generation where church discipline is not practiced and where sin is allowed to fester and dig in will kill a church. If a church gives in to either selfishness or weakness in practicing church discipline then it should not be subsidized so that it can die slower and in more peace. It should face the protocol of God: a short season of chastisement so that it can reinvigorate or terminate. Thus sayeth the Lord. The Lord speaks, who can but prophesy? You will see this process again and again over the next decade. Churches that have chosen selfishness and foolishness will close their doors at record pace. This calls for discernment.

Protocol #2: Arrogance and Forgetfulness

The next protocol I want you to see is in Deuteronomy 8:11-20. Let me read that:

Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. ¹²When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, ¹³and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, ¹⁴then **do not exalt yourself**, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, ¹⁵who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid waste-land with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, ¹⁶and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. ¹⁷Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.' ¹⁸But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. ¹⁹If you do forget the Lord your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. ²⁰Like the nations that the Lord is destroying before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the Lord your God. (NRSV)

The Word of God warns over and over again that for forgetful people blessings can become a curse. There is a cycle that happened over and over again in the life of Israel, you can see it by reading the Book of Judges. God was clear that the law was for their good, that it was in fact a blueprint for blessing. If the people lived by the Word of God they would prosper and every time they did, THEY DID. A generation would arise that loved the Word of God and lived by it and they would prosper. They would make lots of money, live healthy lives, have beautiful children and rest from their enemies. Then they would die and those little rich kids would grow up to be spoiled brats who thought they were entitled to all of these blessings and forgot how their parents had positioned themselves to receive them. And God would, predictably, turn on them and become their enemy and they would suffer poverty, disease, broken relationships and defeat. It isn't hard to locate the story of North America on that protocol is it? I remember being told in my Grade 9 history class that what made North America special is that we were founded by

special people. Protestants fleeing religious persecution in Europe came here and they were good people, who lived clean, invented the “Protestant Work Ethic”. That meant living within your means, getting up early, working hard, going to bed early, saying your prayers and eating your vitamins as Hulk Hogan used to remind us. Doing all of that made us the most blessed nation in all the earth. Does anyone else remember that story? What happened? Now we take God out of the classroom, forbid the remembrance of God’s law in our court systems and we invent a new story to tell our children about the brilliance of the free market system and free flowing credit mixed with the unassailable wisdom of liberal democracy. That’s a dangerous shift. The story isn’t about God or the blessings of his way anymore, now it’s about the superiority of our SYSTEM.

Christian Evangelicals are no better than the culture we have been taken captive by. Success is about SYSTEMS now. We teach people about how the church is like a living room and a kitchen and moving people from one room to another at just the right pace and OH MY GOODNESS! When did fruitfulness become a matter of such things? When did five things that start with M replace ideas like repentance, obedience and self sacrifice? When did the SYSTEM become the Saviour? We have FORGOTTEN GOD church, and we have made gods of our own stupid systems. In our wealth and in our blessing we have become cursed. So what can we reasonably forecast as characterising the next stage of God’s interaction with the Evangelical church in North America?

i. A reminder of scarcity and dependence

This is an old, revealed method of God. The wilderness wandering mentioned in our passage, was understood as being used by God to humble arrogant, self sufficient people. Moses had just said this very thing; we started reading at verse 11 but let me take you back a few verses prior:

Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. ³**He humbled you by letting you hunger**, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. (Deuteronomy 8:2-3. NRSV)

God has a long history of using famine and scarcity to cure his people of arrogance. The Lord has spoken, who can but prophesy? In the near future, watch for the Evangelical church to fall

under serious financial strain. Because we are heavily invested in the world, we will likely share in the scarcities of those around us. Watch for churches to close up shop, cancel ministries and sell properties so that God can humble us. When a church has to sell its building, God will know what is in their hearts by observing their reactions. If they despair it will reveal that they are a church that loves its building. If they take a deep breath and carry on, trusting God to supply and sustain than God will know that they are a church that loves him and they will be reinvigorated and redeployed unto harvest. God is going to humble us by making us hungry.

ii. A display of wrath and holiness

God also has a fairly long history of using displays of wrath and holiness to remind forgetful people who they are dealing with. In Deuteronomy 4 God says that this will happen. You will become complacent and arrogant and forgetful and I will need to remind you of who I am.

Moses says:

²⁷The Lord will scatter you among the peoples; only a few of you will be left among the nations where the Lord will lead you. ²⁸There you will serve other gods made by human hands, objects of wood and stone that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell. ²⁹**From there you will seek the Lord your God,** and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul. ³⁰**In your distress, when all these things have happened to you in time to come, you will return to the Lord your God and heed him.** (Deuteronomy 4:27-30. NRSV)

God will punish and terrify you to remind you so that you turn and seek him, being careful to heed his commandments. By the way, I hope this is unnecessary, but let me show you that God hasn't changed in the New Testament. Hebrews 12 says:

'My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
or lose heart when you are punished by him;
⁶for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves,
and chastises every child whom he accepts.'

⁷Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? ⁸If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. ⁹Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰For **they disciplined us for a short time** as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, **in order that we may share his holiness.** ¹¹Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12:5-11. NRSV)

The Lord has spoken, who can but prophesy? In the near future watch for God to remind a church blinded to his justice, drunk on his grace, that our God is a God of holiness and he is not mocked. Do not lose heart when this happens as though God does not love us. He chastens those

whom he loves. A season will come when God disciplines his church so that we come to share in his holiness. Some will run screaming from the house, refusing to sit under the hand of the Lord and having their weak, ill informed faith shattered by the experience of hardship. Others will grow humble, and they will remember. They will keep the commandments of the Lord and they will live.

Conclusion:

I didn't sleep last night in a mountain cave inhaling methane gas. I simply believe that God is faithful to his Word and faithful to himself. God is visiting his church in judgement because judgement begins with the household of God. You can repent, or you can be rebuked. I counsel repentance. I do not know to what extent each of us shares in the sins of so large a cluster as "the Evangelical Church of North America", but I would like to err on the side of caution. I counsel a season of repentance for whatever fruitlessness, whatever barrenness, whatever arrogance and whatever forgetfulness is found in our church and found in our hearts. The ways of the Lord are old and he is ever faithful to them. The Lord has spoken, who can but prophesy? And all God's people said, amen.