

There is a great and growing worry among the watchers of Lake Michigan that our Great Lake is in danger of being overrun by Asian carp.

This particularly nasty menace of fish is a voracious predator with a track record of taking over and ruining ecosystems with its insatiable hunger and vigorous reproduction.

Environmentalists and fisheries alike are concerned that if this fish gets into Lake Michigan, the delicate balance and biodiversity of the lake's ecology will be ravaged.

It sounds like the problem is that Asian carp are too much like humanity.

In his book Abel Emerging: A Reconsideration of the Christian Story for a Sustainable World, Lutheran pastor Ron Rude, whose daughter many of you know, argues that humanity has been a menace amok in the world, introducing unchecked overconsumption into the earth's ecosystem like Asian carp in a lake.

We as a species are dangerously selfish, taking far more than we need or give back, ravaging the earth and its creatures with our greed, which is blithely blessed by the way that we Christians tell our story.

Rude's argument is too careful and complex for me to give it proper justice in just a sermon--so read the book!--but the thrust of his thesis as I read it is that we need to fundamentally change the way we think about and tell our Christian story, which has been used to underwrite and celebrate all manner of historical atrocities and now, in many of its popular American forms, leads people to dismiss the earth as a way station to heaven, a hotel room instead of a home, so why should we care if it continues after us?

Jesus is just going to come back with a mullet and a machine gun and tear up the place in a big violent video-game battle with the forces of evil anyway; might as well eat and drive whatever we want, since God really made the world as our playhouse.

This view is vastly and tragically different than a calling to a lifestyle marked by service and wise stewardship, humility, appreciation, and loving restraint.

The way we tell and market and imagine our Christian story matters: centuries of thinking that humanity is the crown of creation and that it was all made for us has led us to undervalue the earth and our fellow creatures with either paternalistic condescension or apathetic indifference.

The world existed for millions of years before us and fared quite well, probably better, without us.

Human beings aren't so much creation's crown as its cancer, and now there are more than six billion of us overcrowding this hemorrhaging planet and consuming its resources like Asian carp with credit cards.

And what does Christianity have to say in response?

Not much; we are too busy harping about individual moralisms and arcane dogma, fighting tired old battles about how recently the earth started with no eye on how perilously close we are to its end.

In this sobering reality Jesus' parable about the fig tree takes on a whole new freshness and color. In God's fruitful vineyard, humanity stands out like a barren fig tree, out of touch with the rest of what's going on and wasting the soil.

Moreover, we are not just wasting our patch of soil; we are sucking dry the resources of the entire vineyard.

What was planted as a fig tree has become a poisonous weed.

It makes a certain sense for God to thin us out or cut us down altogether.

I do not believe, however, that God knocked over the tower to kill eighteen innocent people.

It was not God's idea to put Pilate in charge to mingle the blood of innocent Galileans.

It is not God's direct judgment on sin that led to earthquakes in Haiti and Chile; if that were the case, and God were smiting the guilty, God missed, because look, I'm still standing...and so are most of my meat-eating, car-driving, house-heating, energy-wasting family and friends.

Jesus does not directly address our tiresome old question about why the innocent suffer and why bad things happen to good people, maybe because it can't be answered, but more likely because it is too small a question, and too theoretical.

Instead, he makes us get real, and personal.

*Unless you repent, you will all perish*, he says, moving the conversation from them to us, as we always resist, as he always does.

He shifts our focus from a God we want to micromanage to the mirror, where micromanagement won't be nearly enough.

His challenge to repent is exactly what Ron Rude is asking us to do: to change our mindsets, to fundamentally and fully rethink the way we live and profoundly change our behavior.

And to illustrate our opportunity, Jesus tells the parable of the fruitless fig tree.

He moves our eyes from judgmental lightning bolts from the sky back to the ground from which we come.

God is not sitting above the clouds but walking in the vineyard, sampling its goodness, and puzzling over the damage being done by the barren fig tree that thinks its odd difference makes it superior to everything else around it.

We keep taking a lot more than we give, and we sap the vineyard's resources without producing the kind of fruit the vineyard owner was hoping for.

So why should we be wasting the soil?

God's problem, and our hope, is that selfish and fruitless as we are, collectively as much as individually, God still loves us and still wants us to flourish.

God also loves the vineyard, for its own sake and not only for ours, and clings to the beautiful dream of a garden in which fig and vine can thrive together, a lake where whitefish and tilapia and Asian carp can coexist because, ugly and greedy as they are, God loves the carp too.

So what will become of them--what will become of the poisonous fig tree, of us?

The gardener pleads for more time, one more seasonal cycle, one more year.

The gardener gets on his knees just as he did when he washed his disciples' feet to dig away, to nourish us with foul-smelling truth, to work on us until he gets to the roots, the deep ways of thinking and embedded, unseen patterns of greed from which we all need to repent.

Books like Ron Rude's and lives like Jesus Christ's plead with us to stop wasting the soil and to start being who we are planted and meant to be...one small fig tree in a big vineyard, taking what we need and leaving the rest, flourishing in our little spot without having to monopolize the whole estate and bearing fruit to the glory of God.

Why is it so hard for us to be content with such a calling?

How can we stop reaching over to grab and begin reaching down to ground ourselves in our identity as humble creatures of the beloved earth?

Unless we do this, not just as a congregation or a Christian religion but as a species, we all will perish.

And how much time is left for us to repent?

The scientists guess and disagree.

The famous Doomsday Clock suggests six minutes.

Jesus doesn't say.

He is too busy pleading on our behalf, forgiving and sparing us one more time, and on his knees digging deeper in a frenzy to try to change and save us right now.