

March 24, 2019 Third Sunday in Lent
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GOSPEL

Luke 13:1-9

The holy gospel according to Saint Luke, the thirteenth chapter.
Glory to you, O Lord.

¹At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.²[Jesus] asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?”³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

⁶Then 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 around it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

The gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.

Though we’ve come a long way from the opening chapter of Luke’s gospel...the stage he set then is where we find ourselves now. As his telling of the good news began, Luke wove together the stories of two unlikely births. First, John the Baptist’s birth was announced...and soon the birth of Jesus...who would be born not long after his cousin. And John precedes Jesus in ministry (just as he did in birth) preparing the way. John prepared people for Jesus by preaching repentance and offering baptism as a threshold into new life.

Repentance is not something we really learn how to do in our world today...and even within our church lives, we probably still don’t have a fully formed understanding of the way of repentance.

We might think of it as the feeling of saying we're sorry when we step on someone's toes...or let a certain word slip out in a place where it isn't welcome...or even when we miss an important commitment or fail someone in a way where we feel deeply in ourselves the regret of failure and the pain of having caused someone else distress.

But repentance is not apologizing, or even being sorry. It is not regret or remorse. Repentance, you may have heard before, means, more literally...to turn around and take a new path. It is a transformation of heart and mind that also leads to a transformation in living.

But even if we know this, it is difficult to fully understand repentance as a way of life. It is an idea that feels like it falls through the cracks in the sidewalks of our minds. It lives in the space between ideas we understand. We understand being sorry for the wrong things we do and trying to do better...but what would repentance as a way of life really look like? Being sorry and regretful and guilty all the time? That can't be right. God doesn't want us to live that way.

Reading Jesus' words today, I think repentance as a way of life means being continually reminded to see the world and ourselves as they really are, even when so many voices from inside and outside of us try to pull the wool back over our eyes.

It is hard to live in the light of truth. But a repentant life is the constant effort to do so.

Jesus is trying to point people to repentant living today. And in doing so, he points to one of the great lies about life that we are tempted to tell ourselves and each other. He describes horrible tragedies...the slaughter of Galileans by Herod...the deaths of people crushed by a falling tower in Jerusalem. And then he tells the people..."If you are tempted to explain away these tragedies by imagining these people somehow were different or worse than you...somehow deserved such horrible things...then you are sacrificing the worth of their lives on the altar of a lie that makes you feel more safe. Not all suffering is earned. They were no worse than you. Remember that you are as mortal as they are. Live in the light of truth. Repent."

We wouldn't have to change very much to translate Jesus' teaching to what is happening in the world today:

"At that very time there were some present who told him about the Muslims in New Zealand whose blood had been shed while they were praying.[Jesus] asked them, "Do you think that because these people suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other people? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or the more than 600 who were killed in Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi by Cyclone Idai (Ee-die) — do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in their countries? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Today, Jesus says categorically that we don't get to assume that anyone suffers or is outside God's concern because they are worse sinners than those of us who haven't been killed. This is both comforting and unsettling...because it is an incomplete answer. Jesus never does explain why this devastation happened...he just eliminates one possibility...and many remain. It is important that he doesn't draw a one-to-one correlation between suffering and sin. That is a terrible misunderstanding of how sin and tragedy work that needs to be corrected. But it is also important to realize that explaining suffering is not his primary goal in speaking to the people at this moment. Jesus uses this chance where everyone is wondering about the sinfulness of others, and redirects their focus.

There is a video that has made the rounds on the internet for almost 6 years now that comes to my mind at this point. It's a dad filming his two-or-three-year-old daughter trying to buckle her own car seat...and having trouble...but she doesn't want help. He asks her quite a few times if he can help her, but she tells him multiple times, "Worry about yourself!" Now...I don't have the voice of an adorable toddler...so you may just have to trust me that it's hilarious. But you can google it later if you haven't seen it before.

I think of this video often...because it's adorable and funny...but also because there are quite a few situations where Christians maybe should be redirected in their ethical conversations by the commandment to "Worry about yourself!"

And, in a way, that is what Jesus is saying today. “Maybe don’t worry so much about how good or bad everyone else is. Don’t try to draw so many distinctions between yourself and others that you’ve built an imaginary fortress to keep all the goblins out. Because...all it takes is one real goblin to show that the imaginary walls won’t stop it...Maybe instead, try to look the truth in the face, and live as best you can in this uncertain world. I can’t offer you a vaccine against pointless suffering...but I can tell you that every morning you wake up with breath in your body, you have the chance to say what it true, and do the best you can, and know that you are a precious child of God. And that is a good life to live.”

And of course...in the end...when we learn to “worry about ourselves,” we also live into the power we are given to worry about everyone else...by caring for them instead of trying to set ourselves over and against them.

Jesus tells us today how we have the chance to bear fruit for the kingdom...even if we aren’t right now. If we are like the fig tree that the vineyard owner planted that hasn’t born fruit, then Jesus is there to tend the garden of our lives and help us. Because as long as we wake up with breath in our bodies, we have a chance to bear fruit. As long as we open our eyes each day, we have a chance to live in a way where we see and say what is true...and live within the fullness of the kingdom...

We can live lives of repentance...which is to live with our faces turned toward the vision of Jerusalem that Isaiah paints in the first reading today. Isaiah wrote about living together in a place where there was flowing, clear water for the thirsty...and food for the hungry that even the poor could buy and eat. In this city God calls us to eat and drink to spend our lives and our days on the things that bring the deep satisfaction our spirits crave.

Perhaps that is as good a summary of the life of repentance as anything. In this Lenten season we are called to set a course where each day we spend the precious gift of our lives on those things that give birth to more life and love and truth in the world...those things which truly satisfy our deepest hunger and thirst.

May we live in the light of the truth of God's love on this Lenten journey...trusting in the gardener who cares for us and believes in the potential of our lives.

Amen.