

Repent

Luke 13:1-9

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He said what? People come to Jesus with a terrible tale that Pilate, the Roman governor notorious for brutality and injustice, had put to death Galileans offering sacrifices, presumably at the Temple, so that their own blood was mixed together with the blood of the sacrifice. This is a terrible tale. And Jesus said what? “Unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

He said what? A tower had fallen on eighteen people, putting them all to death, causing untold grief and suffering to their family and friends. And Jesus said what? “Unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

Jesus doesn't attach any special sense of blame or guilt to the ones who perished. The ones Pilate put to death were no worse sinners than any other Galileans. The ones on whom the tower fell were no more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem. While we might look for Jesus to be pastoral at this moment, to comfort and explain these things, or at least assure us there was a reason for these tragedies, he does not play the pastoral role in this passage. Here he is the prophet. He uses these two current events to say you never know when your time will come. A wicked ruler can arise and put you to death even while you are offering your religious sacrifices to God. A tower can fall out of nowhere when all you were doing was minding your own business. And at that point, at that moment, the question won't be why did these things happen, but rather, were you right with God? The ultimate Judge is God, and when we come to Judgment Day God will be the Judge. When that day comes will you be right with God? So repent, otherwise you will perish.

Lest we lose sight of the Jesus who truly is compassionate, and not just compassionate in a way that cares enough to tell us hard truths about this world in which we live, but compassionate in the more traditional sense of bringing comfort and hope, he tells a little parable. We are like fig trees growing in the vineyard. Year after year the owner comes by to check us out and finds we have not been bearing fruit. Not a good sign. When you are a fig tree, if you are any good to the owner you better bear fruit. Three years running he said we didn't bear any fruit. We deserve to be cut down. But there is one caring for the vineyard who pleads for mercy, for an extension of time. That extension is granted. Judgment said cut it down. Mercy and grace said, "Give it another chance."

Everyone listening to Jesus that day had another chance. It was too late for the Galileans and too late for ones under the tower of Siloam, but it was not too late for those listening. They still had time to get things right with God. So Jesus, in an act that is actually incredibly kind and caring, warns the people, "Repent, or you too will all perish." Everyone listening to Jesus today has another chance. It might be too late for others, and for that we grieve, we truly do grieve for those for whom it is too late. But it is not too late for us. We have time to get things right with God. Jesus, in an act that is incredibly kind and caring, warns us, "Repent, or you too will all perish."

The scriptures this morning speak with one voice about repentance. We obviously find it in the lesson from Luke. The theme of repentance is also in the Epistle reading from I Corinthians 10 and the Old Testament Lesson from Isaiah 55. Writing to the Christians at Corinth Paul tells of some for whom it is too late to repent. He is writing about what happened to those who passed through the Red Sea, who left Egypt in the Exodus and then followed God through the wilderness. Even though they were "following God" they were not really "following God." And because they were not following God, God was not pleased with them. Oh yes, God is the Judge.

Paul uses the judgment faced by the people in the wilderness as a warning not to take the grace of God in vain. In the wilderness the people became idolaters, worshiping the golden calf; in the wilderness the people committed sexual immorality; in the wilderness the people tested the Lord; and in the wilderness the people grumbled against God. Each of these acts of rebellion was met with judgment, suffering, and even death. It is as if Paul holds up these examples and says do you really want to go down that same path? You don't have to. There is another option. I Corinthians 10 is a passage that gets quoted quite a bit. It is in I Corinthians 10, in relation to the failures of the Israelites, that Paul assures the people, "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to all people. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted (or tested) beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will provide a way out so that you can endure it." (I Corinthians 10:13) Any guesses on what that way out is when we are tempted? Repent. You don't have to travel the same wilderness journey of idolatry, immorality, rebellion, and grumbling. Repent.

Isaiah 55 takes a markedly different tact regarding repentance. Rather than holding up examples of death and judgment, the prophet shows the fruit of repentance, the benefit of repentance, the blessing of repentance. Repentance is not just turning away from judgment. Repentance is turning toward life, and what can rightly be described as abundant life. Here the arms of God are extended and an invitation is extended.

Come, all who are thirsty, come to the waters;

And you who have no money, come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy?

Listen, listen to me and eat what is good,

And you will delight in the richest of fare.

Give ear and come to me;

Listen, that you may live.

I will make an everlasting covenant with you,

My faithful love promised to David.

See, I have made him a witness to the people,
A ruler and commander of the peoples.
Surely you will summon nations you know not,
And nations you do not know will come running to you,
Because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,
For he has endowed you with splendor. (Isaiah 55:1-5)

Who would not repent when you realize what God is offering? He answers our hunger and quenches our thirst not with leftovers or even basic necessities, but with the richest of fare and finest wine, and it is all without cost. It is free, a gift from God. Repent and you live life to the fullest, sinking deep into the arms of the God whose faithful love was promised to David. Not only will you be loved, but you will summon all nations and they will be so enamored with this gracious and loving God they will come running. The splendor of it all is just too much to grasp. The prophet tells us how to respond.

Seek the Lord while he may be found;
Call on him while he is near.
Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts.
Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them,
And to our God, for he will freely pardon. (Isaiah 55:6, 7)

I believe you know exactly what prophet is commanding. Seek, call, forsake, and turn, aren't they all captured in the word for today? Repent. And because we do grieve when walls fall on unsuspecting people, when wicked rulers mingle the blood of the weak and vulnerable, when wars rage and epidemics claim lives, when cyclones and hurricanes and earthquakes and tornadoes cause destruction in ways that break our hearts, God sees fit to extend not only his arms of love but a word intended to help us trust God's hidden counsel, those mysteries of life that just don't make sense. This one who so generously extends all of these splendid blessings for free, offers a word for us in our times of doubt and questioning. It is right here in this passage of Isaiah, a passage about repentance where turning to God places us right in his lap of love. God says:

My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.
As the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are my ways higher than your ways,
And my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8,9)

There you have it. Isaiah says what God has in store for you is more than you could ever hope for or imagine, so repent. Paul says to the Corinthians there's nothing but trouble if you keep on the path you're on, so repent. Jesus says you never know when a wicked ruler is going to hit you with an iron fist, so repent. And you never know when a tower might just fall over right on top of you, so repent. It could be the good, the bad, or the ugly, but whatever happens you are going to face judgment some day, so you might as well repent right here and right now. End of story.

It is the end of the story, isn't it? I mean, how much more needs to be said? It is all perfectly clear. End of story. And yet if it was the end of the story, Jesus could have punched his ticket, returned to the Father in heaven, and said, "Mission accomplished. I told them to repent, and now it is up to them."

This isn't the end of the story. Jesus does not return to heaven at this point. In fact, ever since chapter nine we have been told Jesus has his face set toward Jerusalem. We know what will happen to Jesus in Jerusalem. So does Jesus. He knows what will happen in Jerusalem. And he is going there because it isn't as simple as repent.

Apparently this thing we call sin has a bigger hold on humanity than we give it credit. Apparently the wages of sin really are death, and the stranglehold sin and death have on humanity will require more than a change on *our* part. Something is fundamentally broken in the relationship between God and human beings, and we don't have the power to fix it, to repair it, to conquer it. We are stuck in an old world and even repenting can't make this a new world. So God acts to save this world.

There is much to say about what Jesus did for us in Jerusalem on the cross, but let us at least say this much. Without the crucifixion, there is no amount of repenting we could do that would pay for the guilt we carry, and we could repent every moment of our lives and it would never win a victory over the power of Sin that enslaves this world and leads to so much evil, violence, hatred, rebellion, and death. But that is the point. Jesus has gone to Jerusalem. Jesus has been to the cross. Jesus has paid the price for sin and he has won the victory over death. God raised him from the dead to prove these things to us. Because of that we believe the words of the Apostle Paul that the old is gone and the new has come. We are no longer stuck. Our turning to God is no longer futile. God has changed the world, he has overcome Sin and Death, and now we do have the opportunity to truly turn away from the old and turn to what is new. We can repent and turn to God, turning away from sin and turning toward all of the goodness and grace, the splendor of his glorious love.