

Epworth Chapel on the Green
March 7, 2010
Third Sunday in Lent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Exodus 3:1-15
Psalm 103
I Corinthians 10:1-13
Luke 13:1-9

Our Gospel lesson from Luke today is captivating, in that it is a story that occurs only in Luke and not in the other Gospels. The text introduces us to two groups of people who tragically died, and then just as quickly removes the spotlight, leaving us wondering what in the world happened.

We don't know what happened for sure, but we do know a little about what is on the hearts and minds of Jesus' hearers in this text. They have a burning question in their hearts. What they want to know is: *Are violence and suffering random, or according to divine law?* Secondly, they wonder if there is *a direct correlation between suffering and sin.*

Their question is an oldie, but a goodie. When bad stuff happens to people, is God behind it? Is the bad stuff that happens in life a "payback" of sorts?

Well, those listening to Jesus thought so. They took it for granted that the Galileans who were brutally murdered at the hands of Pontius Pilate and those who died at the collapse of the tower of Siloam committed a terrible sin which made them deserving of their deaths.

This should not be too shocking, since in antiquity it was common to believe that if you became seriously ill or suffered a tragic accident, it was because you had sinned and made God angry.

Remember Job's counselors? Their philosophy was, "Job, you've sinned, man! Come clean about it!"

And remember the disciples who question Jesus in John's Gospel about the man born blind? They ask, "Master, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (cf. John 9:2ff.)

Years later, we moderns may think we have outgrown this cruel logic, but it can still affect us.

A young couple loses a baby to crib death. They think, "we must have made God angry."

You sit across the desk facing your doctor, who says, "we found a tumor, and it is malignant." You think to yourself, "God, what have I done to upset you?"

You lose your job and suffer a setback, and you think, "did I do something to offend God?"

More recently and well known, a prominent preacher in this country proclaimed that the devastating earthquake in Haiti was a result of the fact that the Haitian people had "sold their soul" to the devil.

The logic can be twisted, but it can have a strong grip. We look around and see tragedy befall others, and we secretly wonder -- if only for a minute -- if they might have had it coming. We experience a setback or a tragedy in our own lives, and we pause -- if only briefly -- to consider what we might have done to anger the Almighty.

And at that moment Jesus appears on the scene, speaking some important words to us: REPENT! Change and correct the way you are thinking.

Our formulas are not as watertight as we think. Suffering and tragedy are not always God's payback for sin. And the fact that things may be well with us is not necessarily a sign of God's pleasure, either!

Notice how Jesus shifts the focus here from those "out there" to us. He says, "unless *you* repent, *you* will also perish."

Rather than accusing others and implicitly congratulating ourselves for our greater righteousness, we would do well, says Jesus, to look within ourselves.

Jesus' call to us to repent shows us that all of life is under God's judgment, not just what happens to people "out there." All of life is under God's judgment, and that means that each of us is called to live our whole lives in repentance and trust. Repentance is to be a lifestyle, and because of that, it is not linked merely to life's sorrows *or* life's joys.

But thinking about repentance as a *way of life* is not easy for us. We tend to think of repentance more as a one time event, or as a response to isolated incidents in life. Sometimes we tend to link it very closely with our conversion.

But repentance, like faith, is not an isolated act. It is attitude, a posture of response in our relationship with God. It is ongoing. It is continual. It involves not only turning *from* specific actions and attitudes that are not God's will for us, but also a continual process of learning to see the world like God sees it. It involves learning to love like God loves, and allowing your heart to be broken by the things that break God's heart.

That's what I hear Jesus telling these people in our Gospel text. Life in God's kingdom is not about gaining favors and avoiding losses. Trying to interpret events and actions as God's finger of judgment on others is not the point. All of life is under God's judgment, and without repentance, everything and everyone is lost. Unless you and I learn to think differently, to love differently, to have our hearts changed by the grace of God, then it doesn't matter what happens to anyone else. We will be like fig trees that bear no fruit.

In 1934, while Hitler was committing atrocities in Germany, German pastor Martin Niemoller preached a sermon to his congregation from this Gospel text.

Addressing his congregation as "fellow penitents," he said:

There is great danger in thinking that the call to repentance does not concern us; that this judgment of God is not meant for us; and that we

may carry our heads high and justly talk of the sins of others. The fig tree owes its life to patience and to grace alone, and no one knows how long this will last. [Lectionary Homiletics, 15:2, p. 50]

On this third Sunday in Lent, I invite you to the Lord's Table, where we hear his invitation to us. It is an invitation to *repentance*, to a way of life and not merely isolated events in life. It is an invitation to be touched by grace so that we commit ourselves anew to see the world through God's eyes and to love the world with God's heart.

The bread and wine are expressions of God's grace to us this morning, and they remind us that God is patient with us, like the fig tree. And because repentance is an ongoing need in life, the bread and the wine are a means to open our eyes, quicken our minds, and enflame our hearts as we live all of life under God's embrace.

So come with gratitude and faith. Receive the grace he offers. And give thanks.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.