



SERMONS THAT WORK

Lent 3 (C)

Repentance

[RCL] Exodus 3:1-15, Psalm 63:1-8, 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, Luke 13:1-9

From lightning and tempest; from earthquake, fire, and flood; from plague, pestilence, and famine, from violence and oppression, and from dying suddenly and unprepared, Good Lord, deliver us. Amen.

Today's gospel reading opens with two rather perplexing and distressing examples of dying suddenly and unprepared. Biblical scholars tell us that nothing further is known of the Galileans murdered by Pilate nor the victims of the collapse of the tower of Siloam; details of those disasters are lost in the mists of time. We can presume, however, that these events were known to the ancient audiences of Luke's gospel.

In this central section of Luke's narrative, Jesus is on a prophetic journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, preaching and teaching along the way. Crowds have gathered to hear him speak. Some of those present bring up the fate of some Galileans brutally murdered by Pilate while they were at prayer in the Temple in Jerusalem. Were they sinners? Did they deserve their fate?

Jesus speaks clearly to his listeners. These were random events, not meant as examples of divine punishment. These people did not die because they were sinners. They died because life is fragile and unpredictable.

Jesus addresses those of us who have survived thus far. We should not mistake our good fortune for God's special blessing. He repeats twice, for emphasis: Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

Perish has a double meaning. We can perish both outwardly and inwardly: the concrete death of the body, and the abstract death of the soul. As we pray in the collect of the day: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls.

Jesus is speaking of death in an eschatological sense, the destruction of the soul. The warning is unmistakable: Repent before it is too late.

Indeed, anything could happen at any time. Wildfire, flood, terrorism, cancer diagnosis. Awareness of life's fragility creates urgency. The unrepentant may suddenly find they have delayed too long.

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Yet while we live, it is not too late. Jesus follows his warning with the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree. In the parable, bearing fruit is an image of repentance. This tree may continue to live without bearing fruit because it has been granted additional time, unlike the victims of the disasters in the first part of the passage. The gardener in the parable is a good steward of souls. Give them another chance, offer them some support, perhaps they'll see the light. But unless the tree makes good use of the additional time, the result will be its destruction. Time to repent, like life itself, is not infinite.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians, in contrast, depicts a time when God punishes those who have actually failed to be faithful, through the sins of idolatry, sexual immorality, putting Christ to the test, or complaining. Paul, writing to a predominantly Gentile congregation in a diverse city, is responding to a lost letter from the Corinthians asking for guidance about several disputes. According to the commentary in the Harper Collins Study Bible, Paul addresses rival groups maneuvering for control, indifference to flagrant immorality, and a disregard for those who are not fully enlightened about appropriate Christian conduct. Today's passage follows the section in which Paul addresses the question of whether Christians may eat food that has been sacrificed to idols. He is critical of those who boast that they have special wisdom or knowledge of correct religious practice. Paul warns us: So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.

Those failures to be faithful that Paul lists could happen to anyone. We are all wandering in the wilderness. Paul could be thinking of the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree when he writes, "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it." God is patient, forgiving, even hopeful for humankind.

We've heard a great deal about repentance, from John the Baptist to Jesus to Paul. What does it mean, to repent? The dictionary affirms what most of us would answer: to "feel or express sincere regret or remorse about one's wrongdoing or sin" (Oxford Languages). *Mea culpa, mea culpa*, I have sinned. Yes, to repent is to regret past sins. What about concrete action? If possible, to correct those sins, and to move forward doing good deeds? In a spiritual sense, repentance might mean a change of mind, of perspective, a new way of seeing things. Repentance might mean that, as Christians, we are called to seize the opportunity for joy in God's grace.

The gospel passage is about urgency. Our existence is precarious. God is patient, but the parable implies perhaps not infinitely so. Our time is running out. What does repentance look like in a time of uncertainty, when we can control so little, when injustice spins out of control? What about this possibility: Be as kind and helpful as possible in daily life. Work toward being compassionate, aware, conscious, civic-minded. Be a fertile part of the village, even when it's not necessarily easy or convenient.

Repentance is not a one-and-done occurrence. As Paul writes, if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. Repentance is ongoing, a daily, even hourly, process. In the face of life's fragility,

unpredictability, and urgency, let us consider repentance as a practice. Beginning with a Lenten practice, may we begin to consider and act upon the ways we can contribute to our communities. A smile, a compliment. An act of kindness and help. Generosity, financial and with presence. Keeping our planet healthy in ways large and small.

Jesus teaches us that a disaster could happen at any time, through no fault of our own. Paul reminds us that a failure to be faithful could happen to anyone. In either case, we must be vigilant and humble, and we must repent. These are the messages of Lent. Our time is running out. May we live our lives in a state of repentance.

Let us pray, in the words of Saint Francis, who had much to say about a repentant spiritual life:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

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