

God-Revealing Transformation

Luke 13:1-9

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3rd Sunday in Lent

Bethel Presbyterian Church

March 24, 2019

Our gospel reading for this Third Sunday in Lent, comes from Luke, chapter 13, verses 1 through 9. In chapter 12 of Luke's gospel, Jesus has been teaching, sometimes to a large crowd, and sometimes to a smaller group of disciples. Jesus has been teaching about the coming kingdom, and the end of days. In general, the message has been that the time is coming soon, and now is the time for repentance. In our reading, someone in the crowd tells Jesus about recent events, but Jesus continues to teach repentance and response to God's grace. Listen to this reading from Luke, chapter 13:

Gospel Reading

^{13:1} At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

² He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

⁴ Or 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? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

⁶ Then 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.

⁷ So 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?'

⁸ He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Sermon

- Last week, 50 Muslims were murdered, during prayers, by a white supremacist in Christchurch, New Zealand.
- Last October 11 Jews were murdered during Sabbath Services by a white supremacist in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.
- In June 2015, 9 African American Christians were murdered during a prayer service by a white supremacist, in Charleston, South Carolina.
- And, according to our reading from Luke, around 32 C.E. a group of Galileans were murdered while performing required sacrifices, presumably at the Temple in Jerusalem.

All of these stories are shocking, but you might be surprised to hear that our reading, and this sermon, is not about the evil in a world where people are murdered in the name of prejudice.

- At least 5 people are dead after record flooding in Nebraska and Iowa in the last few weeks.
- Over 100 people died in wildfires in California in 2018
- Thousands of people lost their lives during a 2010 earth quake in Haiti.
- And, according to our reading, 18 people died when a tower collapsed near the well of Siloam in Jerusalem, during the life of Jesus.

But, again, our reading, and this sermon, are not about the tragic things that happen in the world. Our reading, and this sermon, are about a pertinent topic for the season of Lent: repentance.

Common belief, in ancient times, was that anything bad that happened to a person was the result of their own sin, or the sin of their parents, or the sin of more distant ancestors. Kind of like now, when after an act of violence, or some disaster, some extreme person proclaims that what happened was God's punishment for some unforgivable sin or lifestyle choice. But Jesus says, no!

Or some Christians will say that if a person is ill, or encounters some other difficulty in life, they will advise prayer. And, if things do not improve, blame them for not praying correctly. But Jesus says, No!

Jesus has a different interpretation of these events. Fifteen Galileans murdered by Pilate; Jesus said: "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."

Eighteen people die when a tower collapsed; Jesus said: "Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Jesus came proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was near, and like John the Baptist, called for the people to repent, and turn to God. These two events, as Jesus is interpreting them, are signs that time is running out and people should act sooner rather than later. Several of the parables of Jesus dealt with us not knowing when the end would come and the importance of being prepared, and this is the message of the first part of our reading this morning. Time is running out, no one knows when the hour will come, now is the time to turn away from the sin of this world and turn to God, before it is too late.

As Paul said in Romans, chapter 3, verse 23: "there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

We are all in need of repentance, and should turn from the ways of sin, toward God. Jesus says, repent now!

As frightening as these stories are, and as urgent as this message seems, there is good news at the same time. In the second part of our reading, Jesus tells a parable:

"A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So 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?'

[The gardener] replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

The landowner is a man of patience. He has waited for three years to get fruit from his fig tree. But, now the time for patience is over, it is time to act. He commands the gardener to cut down the tree, so the soil can be used for more productive plants. But the gardener advocates for giving the tree one more chance. The gardener will till the soil around the tree and add some fertilizer. Just the thing a tree needs to become fruitful. Obviously, this is good news for the tree!

And, this is good news for us. Even though we are all in need of repentance, we have an advocate in Jesus Christ. First John, chapter 1, verses 1 and 2, says: "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins..." But having an

advocate, even the Son of God, does not mean that we are free from the need for repentance. Remember Paul said: "...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

I think everyone in rural Iowa knows the benefit of a little manure on crop production. There certainly is enough of it spread around on the farms. As the nitrogen soaks into the ground, it's benefit on the crop is obvious.

I would say that the nurturing power of the Word of God is like that nitrogen. As we read, and hear, and study, the Word of God, we too are permeated with the truth of God's redeeming grace in Jesus Christ. Now, if you leave here and tell anyone that I compared scripture to manure, please include the context. The gardener tilled the soil around the fig tree and applied manure to its roots. The nitrogen and other nutrients soaked into the soil and fed the roots of the fig tree, and in the same way the word of God feeds and nurtures us. Got it?

Remember Paul said: "there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..." but he went on to say, in verse 24, that "they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

Lent is time of repentance. Jesus has made it clear that the time is coming when the Kingdom of the Lord will come to us all, and we must respond as the sinners that we are. But Lent is also the time when we journey with Jesus to Jerusalem and the cross of Good Friday. When his redeeming sacrifice, and his death conquering resurrection will bring us to the grace of God's forgiveness.

The end of the parable about the fig tree in the garden is open ended. We are not told if the tree produced fruit the following year. We do not know the end of the story. About that end, and about our end...I guess only God knows.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, we hear the message that we are sinners, and in need of new direction in our lives. Jesus shows us the error of our ways, nurtures us through his word, and advocates for us in your court. In thanksgiving, we are the beneficiaries of your grace, help us to sing songs of thanksgiving to the world. That they too may know your grace and salvation. In the saving name of your Son, Jesus Christ, we pray. AMEN.