

“Repent!”

Luke 13:1-9

Third Sunday in Lent + March 20, 2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

Isn't it something how the bad news always seems to overshadow the good news? They say with regard to the local newscast, “If it bleeds, it leads.” Week after week it's the same, isn't it: another shooting, more rumors of war, another leader who has fallen from grace, another so-called “natural” disaster.

Before there was television or radio or even newspapers, people shared the latest by word of mouth. Almost two thousand years ago, as Jesus was beginning to work His way toward Jerusalem, people share the latest with Him. The news had just come from the temple compound in Jerusalem that some Galileans were murdered by Governor Pilate's troops. Jesus hears that report and then brings up another recent disaster: a tower collapsed in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Siloam, killing eighteen people. Two disasters: one man-made, the other apparently a random “accident”—though perhaps there was human error that led to the collapse of the tower.

What does Jesus say about these happenings? He simply says, “Repent!” And that is the word to us this Lenten season as well: repent. Let's talk about that today, using these four points: (1) Repent when you consider the brokenness around you. (2) Repent with a genuine change of heart. (3) Repent in view of God's coming wrath. (4) Repent in view of God's present grace.

— I —

Repent when you consider the brokenness around you. This is the proper Christian response when we hear of tragedies, all of which are, at their root, caused by the brokenness brought on by the fall into sin. Even so-called “natural disasters” are part of the curse that came on the world after the Fall. When we hear of such things we do not say, “It will never happen to me.” We do not say, “It serves them right.” We say, “That could have been me. Lord, have mercy.” Let the brokenness around you, in the light of God's Holy Word, give you a broken and a contrite heart, a heart that is freed from self-righteousness and pride. Let the brokenness around you point to your own brokenness.

When we hear of something terrible that another person has done we do not say, “I would never do anything like that” or “God, I thank you that I am not like that” but rather, “There, but for the grace of God, go I. God, have mercy on me a sinner.” This is the attitude we read about in 1 Corinthians: “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall,” 1 Corinthians 10:12.

Jesus does not explain to the people why these particular tragedies happened to those particular people and not to others. In fact, He plainly says the people who died were no worse sinners than others. When you hear of these misfortunes falling to others, look not on their sins, but look inside at your own sins, and turn away from them. Why did the tornado take two people and leave many others? We don't know; but hear the word of God and repent! We have all known any number of people who died tragic deaths in the prime of their life. We would like to ask the question “Why?” Jesus steers us away from that question. We know that we are all subject to death because of the sin that is in us. That is enough to know. To try to figure out why some die peacefully at an old age in their own beds while others die in a tragic accident or from some horrible disease – this is a question that is for the Lord alone to know and answer. What do we take away from these happenings: Jesus says, “Repent!” That is, live in daily repentance. Ask yourself the question: “Am I ready to meet my Maker?” “How do I know that I am not next?” The world is a fragile place and human life even more tenuous; at any given time, no matter what our age, we are only a heartbeat away from eternity.

What made the murders at the temple especially heinous was that the human blood from these murder victims was mixed with the blood of their sacrifices. Apparently Pilate's troops killed them right in the middle of a sacred act, going where no Gentile was allowed to go. It was outrageous! And outrageous things are still happening today. The unthinkable happens. The best, most Godly people are cut down in the prime of their lives by an accident or some heinous crime or some horrific disease. What do we say about it? We say, with genuine repentance, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Repent with a genuine change of heart. Let's review what it is to repent. In its proper sense, repentance includes two things: sorrow over our sin and trust in Jesus Christ who has taken away our sins. In other words, true repentance is not something you can produce in yourself; it is a gift from God. In one place the Lord, through the prophet Ezekiel, describes it as sort of a heart transplant: "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, ... And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules" (Ezekiel 36:25-27). This is why right after hearing the word of God we often sing and pray: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." We cannot produce this in ourselves, but we can surely resist it and stubbornly reject it.

Such a heart that has been renewed will naturally produce good works. Our reading from Ezekiel today tells us what some of those fruits of faith might be: "If the wicked restores the pledge [that is, does not accept collateral when loaning to a poor person], gives back what he has taken by robbery, and walks in the statutes of life, not doing injustice, he shall surely live; he shall not die" (Ezekiel 33:15). Elsewhere he speaks of giving bread to the hungry and providing clothing for those who need it (Ezekiel 18:7). It is not that these works themselves will save a person, but the works give evidence that a genuine change of heart has occurred.

Jesus tells a parable about the owner of a vineyard who plants a fig tree there. The fig tree was much cultivated because of its sweet fruit, which the owner of the vineyard looked for year after year. Our good works, when done out of thanksgiving to God for saving us and for the benefit of our neighbor, are sweet fruits that are pleasing to God. For example, when the Apostle Paul writes to the Philippians to tell them "thanks" for the donation they had sent, he tells them that their gift is "an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, wellpleasing to God" (Philippians 4:18, KJV). That is a fruit of genuine faith.

— III —

Repent in view of God’s coming wrath. God is patient, but His patience has a limit. Jesus says very plainly: “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (vv.3 & 5) and perish eternally. Some commentators believe Jesus’ parable here was directed especially at the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. The vineyard is the nation of Israel, and the fig tree is Jerusalem. They point out that Jesus is in His third year of public ministry and that John had preached repentance for a year or so before Jesus came on the scene. Soon Jesus would be taken from them. How much longer will the time of grace continue for you and me? How many more days or weeks or years do we have before we die, or before the Lord Jesus returns? The time of grace is running out. Repent now!

— IV —

Repent in view of God’s present grace. The time of grace is still here! It has not expired! God’s word lays these truths right up alongside each other: God’s wrath is coming, but He is long-suffering and patient. He is kind and merciful, but He will not leave the guilty unpunished. He has perfect mercy and perfect justice. The Lord revealed Himself to Moses in just this way. The Lord put Moses in a cleft in the rock and passed by to declare His name, the LORD. As He passed by Moses He proclaimed: “The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty” (Exodus 34:6-7). How can this be, that God both forgives sin and yet will by no means clear the guilty? You can only understand this in view of Jesus and the cross. At the cross of Jesus, God was perfectly just. He dished out the deserved punishment for all of sinful humanity on His eternal Son. But, by taking that punishment Himself, the Lord Jesus provided full pardon and forgiveness for everyone who would believe in Him. Christ was put to death for our sins and raised again for our justification: that is, when He was raised, the Father declared forgiveness available to all sinners.

Now Jesus lives to intercede for us. He gets between us and God the Father to speak to the Father on our behalf. You can see this in the parable before us: Jesus is the vinedresser who pleads with the owner: “Sir, let it alone

this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure” (v.8). The owner and the vinedresser quickly agree: The owner agrees to one more year; the vinedresser agrees that the time may come for the tree to be cut down if it is still unfruitful. There is justice but there is also mercy.

Daily repentance does not mean living in gloom and doom. Yes, there is sorrow over one’s sins, a sense of regret wishing you could do it over. But it also includes trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sins. It is really nothing else than faith itself. And this faith brings joy, real and lasting joy, joy that goes beyond any shallow happiness or merriment. Recall that the angels of heaven and the Lord Himself rejoice over one sinner who repents! Remember the Lord’s parable wherein the Father threw a great celebration with music and dancing (Luke 15:25) when the prodigal son returned home. Living in daily repentance allows for living in the joyful celebration that the one who was lost has been found, that the one who was dead is alive again—and that one is you and I.

So, therefore, dear friends, repent daily! Repent when you consider the brokenness around you. Repent with a genuine change of heart. Repent in view of God’s coming wrath. Repent in view of God’s present grace.