***REPENT!***

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Texts: Isaiah 55:6-9 and Luke 13:1-9

What an awful thing to do! According to reports cited by Luke, Pilate directed the slaughter of innocent Galileans who were offering their sacrifices at the temple. Their blood was mixed at the altar with the blood of the animal sacrifices they offered to the Lord, making them human sacrifices of a sort. Showing no respect for their faith or for the Lord in whose house his soldiers wielded their swords, Pilate committed what would surely be considered a crime against humanity today – like the bombing of hospitals by the IDF in Gaza, or the slaughter of Israelis at that October concert that lit the fuse of the latest Israel-Hamas conflict, or the missile attacks on schools in Ukraine by Russian forces. These are awful, despicable things to do – like enslaving Africans or separating children from their parents at the border or slaughtering native people in the pursuit of land and resources in our own nation’s sordid history. These are evils perpetuated by human actors. And they are condemned by prophets and preachers and priests across the generations.

But when Jesus heard about Pilate’s atrocities, his focus was not upon Pilate’s conduct, but upon those who died and those who were reporting the event. That is not to say that Pilate did not come under judgment for his heinous actions, but rather that Jesus had a different point to make, as Luke records it. The same question arose when eighteen people were killed when the Tower of Siloam fell on them, the same question that is raised in some circles when a tornado devastates a town or a flood sweeps away a family or a fire devastates a community: Are their deaths God’s judgment upon them for some inordinate sinfulness? Were these victims worse sinners than anyone else?

It is the same theology voiced by Job’s friends who urged him to confess what terrible thing he had done to deserve God’s punishment in the disasters that befell him. It has its 21st century equivalent in the irksome voice of Pat Robertson who suggested that 9/11 was God’s punishment for sins about which he had been preaching, or those who suggest that the wildfires in California were God’s judgment upon that state for its sins. It is a theology that suggests that disasters are God-ordained and deaths God’s will, as if a loving God would desire that the twin towers come crashing down upon all those within its walls or a flood sweep away a child or a hospital be bombed. Was it really the sins of the victims that led to their deaths – sins beyond those of the rest of us who survive?

In response to that corrupt theology Jesus offers a resounding NO! God does not will for Pilate to slaughter worshipers at the altar or for hospitals or schools to be bombed or people to be enslaved or jets to crash into buildings. God does not will towers to topple on those passing below or send tornados to kill all the people in their path. There is evil in the world, and sometimes that evil manifests itself in death. History is replete with examples, including the cross toward which we journey this Lenten season. There are accidents which take lives, and violent storms that wreak destruction from time to time, but these are not the instruments of an angry God who is looking to punish sinners with particularly violent death. They just happen without any one person being the target of God’s wrath, and God mourns every loss of life in such circumstances, mourns as parents mourn for their children, for we are all children of a loving God.

But there is a second question to which Jesus turns his attention in considering these tragedies. It is a question bound up in Jesus’ curious statement: “*Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did*.” How did they perish? In the blink of an eye, through no fault of their own, without time to get their affairs in order or get right with God. *Unless you repent you will die as they did*, he says, without time to suddenly reorder your priorities and repent of your sins. The question at the core of his statement is this: *When then will you repent of your sins?* These violent deaths do not reflect the sudden judgment of an angry God for inordinate sinfulness, but they do remind us how fragile life is. One moment the people were doing what they do in their daily lives, and in the next they were gone. Do not think that you have all the time in the world to get your life together and to get right with God, suggests Jesus. Do not take life for granted; life is fragile! Make the most of the time you have, for stuff happens, tragedies occur, not only to others far away in Ukraine and Gaza and California, but here too.

Lent is a time to pause and take stock of such questions and to consider your response to that question: When will you repent? The word *repent* is rooted in a Hebrew word meaning *turn*. To repent is to turn – to turn away from sin and to turn toward God, to turn away from who we’ve been and turn toward who we might be. It is not just saying “I’m sorry” for sins of the past; it is turning toward a new path for the future, a more faithful way, God’s way. The early Christian movement was called simply that – the Way. It is the way of God that we embrace, the way that Jesus showed us, a way of living and loving and forgiving day to day. Repentance begins with renouncing the old way of sin, but it also demands that we embrace this new way of God. With that in mind, I ask you again the question posed by Jesus’ response to those folks lamenting those horrific deaths: When will you repent? If something were to happen tomorrow – a terrible tragedy or medical emergency or zombie apocalypse – would you be good with God or would you find yourself making excuses for your procrastination and scrambling to justify your delay?

“*Repentance is our response to grace, not a condition of grace*,” writes James B. Torrance. “*The goodness of God leads us to repentance*.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Repentance is not a desperate stab at avoiding the judgment of a wrathful God. It is an embrace of God’s grace that trusts that God’s promises are trustworthy and true, so that our repentance falls on loving ears that have longed to hear our confession. It is the embrace of that life of grace extended to us in place of the life of sin in which we have wallowed. It is the path that Isaiah urged upon Israel’s exiles:

*Let the wicked forsake their way and the unrighteous their thoughts;*

*let them return to the Lord, that the Lord may have mercy on them,*

*and to our God, for God will abundantly pardon.*

Repentance trusts that those words of Isaiah are true – that our God is merciful and loving, not looking to smite us with death, but to embrace us as prodigal children returning home. And yet, says Jesus, do not assume that you have all the time in the world to make that move. Then he tells the parable of the unproductive fig tree.

I don’t know what it is that Jesus had against fig trees. Days before his death he curses a fig tree, and it immediately withers and dies. It is not like a fig tree is kudzu or poison ivy or some noxious plant that inflicts suffering on its caretakers. We have a fig tree in our house, and while it bears no figs, we don’t curse it on our way past. Yet Jesus chooses the fig tree for this parable which is not just about the tree, but also about the gardener who tends it. You heard the parable: A man plants a fig tree in his vineyard and after three years expects it to bear some figs. When he finds that it has not done so, he tells the gardener to cut it down, saying, “Why should it be wasting the soil?” But perhaps also suggesting, “Why should it be wasting our time!” The fig tree has been unproductive, yet the gardener suggests giving it one more year, another chance if you will, saying:

*“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 gardener wants one more chance to save it, one more opportunity for the fig tree to bear fruit. What happens next is an open question: Will the tree prove fruitful – or not?

I do not think it a coincidence that Jesus chooses three years as the time that the tree has proved unfruitful. It is the same amount of time he spent in his ministry, preaching and teaching and calling the people to repent. Yet after three years, they seemed little more fruitful than the fig tree – still lingering there with little to show for themselves. Give it a little more time, says the gardener. Give them a little more time – not an indefinite amount, not an unlimited amount – but a little more time to be nurtured with all that they need to prove fruitful.

It has been two thousand years since Jesus spoke these words. It has been years since you spoke your first words, years since you made your profession of faith; after all that time, are you any more fruitful than the fig tree? Have you repented and turned back to God and become fruitful? It is not a one and done thing. We repent and sin and repent again, trusting that God has not given up on us. Jesus came to tend to us – to nurture and enrich our lives in the hope that we might yet be made productive in this corner of God’s vineyard. There is still time to repent, still time to turn back to God and God’s Way. It is not an indefinite time. It is not without risk of sudden tragedy intervening. It is not something to put off until next week or next month or next year.

*To repent is to come to your senses,* writes Frederick Buechner*...True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, “I’m sorry,” than to the future and saying, “Wow!”[[2]](#endnote-2)*

That is what God wants of us and for us – repentance that turns us away from our sorry pasts to the glorious future of God’s *Wow*! Without delay, without excuse, without fear, God wants us to repent and embrace the Wow of God! This is the third Sunday in Lent. When then will you repent, my brothers and sisters? If not now, then when – then when? Amen

1. James B. Torrance quoted by Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Pray Without Ceasing*, Eerdmans Publishing Co:2006, p.165 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Harper & Row: San Francisco, 1973, p.79 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)