

March 20, 2022
Third Sunday in Lent
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Luke 13:1-9 (Ezekiel 33:7-20; 1 Corinthians 1-13)

REPENT AND LIVE A RIGHTEOUS LIFE.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Our text for meditation today comes from the Gospel according to St Luke, the 13th chapter, which you heard read earlier.

All of our readings this morning are hard to hear. They give a stern and sobering warning to sinners such as you and me, putting fear into our hearts, so that we repent and live righteous lives.

As Baptized and redeemed children of God, it is easy to sit safe and secure within the walls of the church and look out through rose colored stained glass windows and wag our fingers at the wicked and murderous rulers of the world who are waging unjust wars. We call them to repentance. It is easy to denounce those filthy rotten sinners over there with their addictions and social diseases and call them to repentance. It is also easy to castigate those who proclaim false and misleading doctrines and are leading folks away from true faith and salvation in Christ Jesus and call them to repentance.

But in our readings today God is not only calling the greatest and most vile sinners to repentance, but He also is calling you and me fellow believers. Yes, you and I who believe ourselves to have our Christian act together, the Lord is calling us to turn and flee from our sinful ways, confess our sins and return to the Lord our God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. (cf: Joel 2:13)

The Lord God is *faithful* and He is *just*. *Faithful* means that He always keeps His promises. *Just* is a forensic and legal term that means He always judges according to His Word. When God says the wages of sin is death, He means it. (cf: Romans 6:23) In the first half of our Gospel text this morning we heard two separate tragedies. Although history doesn't record these events, there is one lesson. That is – every tragedy is a call from our Lord to repent.

In the first tragedy, some Galileans came to Jerusalem to make their sacrifice, but the wicked Roman governor, Pilate, gruesomely murdered them and mixed their blood with their sacrifice. In the second, a tower fell and killed eighteen people in Siloam. In both cases, the question is asked: *“Were those who are now dead worse sinners than everyone else? Did these tragedies happen to them because they were more sinful?”* Jesus answers plainly with the exact same words in both cases, saying:

“No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” (Luke 13:3, 5)

Jesus is emphatic. Two times He says: *“No, these folks are not worse sinners.”* Two times He calls you and me and all people to repentance. Two times He warns about perishing. The lesson is: you and I are not immune to God’s wrath. When tragedy occurs, you and I cannot discern whether it is an assault from the devil or a time of testing sent from God. What we do know however is that every human tragedy is a call from God to repent.

When God says the wages of sin is death, He means it. Regardless of whether the sin is as heinous as murder or as mild as giving your neighbor the angry stink-eye, all sin receives the same punishment. It don’t matter if it is the wicked and cruel Pontius Pilate or your gracious godly grandmother, it’s just a matter of time. Death is coming for everyone. No one gets out alive. Your only salvation from death is turn from your sin and trust alone in Christ Jesus.

Old Testament Scripture contains many examples of God destroying those turned their backs on Him. St Paul lists some of them in our epistle text. He points out that even though the children of Israel were God’s chosen people, they were not immune to His wrath. Because of their unfaithfulness, God literally wiped thousands and thousands of sinners off the face of the earth. Just because God chose them as His own people it didn’t mean that they still didn’t deserve the wages of their sin. God knew their hearts. He knew their faithlessness. Paul writes:

“... with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. ⁶ Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.” (1 Corinthians 10:5)

These examples are recorded a warning so that you and I learn from what happened to Israel and flee from evil. Don’t be confused or misled. The Lord God is not an angry God who lurks in the shadows waiting on you to transgress so He can jump out and squish you like a bug. It’s quite the contrary. As He spoke through His prophet Ezekiel:

“As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live...” (Ezekiel 33:11)

Ezekiel was one of many watchman sent by the Lord to call His people to repentance. Because God doesn’t take pleasure in the death of anyone, the Lord not only sent the call to repentance and faith, He also provides an escape route so that you can flee from your temptation. In our epistle text Paul says:

“¹³ No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” (1 Corinthians 10:13)

This verse is often applied. Many say that God will not give you more than you can handle. That is incorrect. He never said that you won’t ***suffer tragedy*** greater that you believe you can handle. What He did say is he will not let you be ***tempted*** beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the ***way of escape***. And that escape is – turn and flee to Jesus. Every human tragedy and every temptation is a call from God to repent. Sin is the cause of all the evil in this

world, and when temptation and calamity strikes, through Christ Jesus' sacrificial death in your stead, God has made a way of escape through repentance.

In verse 6 of our Gospel text, Jesus tells a parable. In this parable, the owner of the vineyard is God. The vinedresser is Jesus and all who proclaim His Gospel message of forgiveness and salvation. And the fig tree is you and all who believe in Christ. As God's fig tree, He has planted you within His garden of grace. He planted you in His garden in Baptism or when you came to faith by the Holy Spirit in hearing the Word of God.

Like any gardener, God plants with the expectation of harvesting a crop. The difference is, God is more than a gardener. He is the Lord of the harvest. Not just the harvest of grapes and figs, but the harvest of believers in Christ Jesus, providing them a way of escape, rescuing them out of the temptations and tragedies of this life, out of sin and trespasses, and out of this vale of tears, delivering them into eternal life and blessedness.

God is seeking a different fruit than you and I would. You and I seek the fruit of the pleasures of the world, good health, wealth, and comfort. God, on the other hand, is looking for fruit in the life of the Christian. He's looking for the fruit of repentance, that you humbly acknowledge your sinfulness and ask Him for forgiveness because of the love He has for you through His Son. He's looking for the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (cf: Galatians 5:22–23)

Unfortunately, not every plant produces fruit. Maybe you have experienced this in your garden. After planting your seed, some of what you have sown doesn't sprout. Others might take off growing like gangbusters but later leaves you disappointed. Corn stalks with no ears. Tomato and cucumber plants with little or no fruit. Transplanted flowers and trees that died or dried up and went away. All leaving empty spots in your yard or garden.

So it is in the Christian Church. Perhaps you feel as if the sap of your faith is waning and you are struggling to bear fruits of repentance and faith. In our pews, we have empty spots where someone used to sit whom God had planted in His vineyard. But the sap of their faith has dried up and gone away. What should you and I have done? What should we be continually doing?

On a farm, if the farmer doesn't get a crop they plow everything up and start over. If your tomatoes and cucumbers are not bearing fruit in your garden and your apple and peach trees are not bearing fruit, you tear them out and replant. In His parable Jesus give us an example from the Vinedresser how we should respond. He says:

"... let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. ⁹ Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."
(Luke 13:8–9)

If you believe the sap of your faith is waning and you are struggling to bear fruits of repentance and faith, dig around your roots with God's promises made you in Baptism. Put on the manure, that is, the fertilizing whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. (cf: Ephesians 6:11) Jesus says:

"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

When you abide in Jesus, He gets down in the dirt and digs around your roots, exposes your sin, and draws you to repentance. Through Word and Sacrament, He waters and nourishes and fertilizes your faith. He gives you the best soil: His Gospel so your roots of faith grow deep into His Word. He gives you His body and blood in His supper to feed, fertilize, and sustain you in this life unto life everlasting.

Instead of tearing everything out and starting over, as vinedressers, you and I should reach out to those who are missing – those who used to flourish in our midst. Visit them, pour a little fertilizer on them by reminding them of the love Jesus has for them and apart from Him we can do nothing. Above all, pray for them.

At Baptism, a child's sponsor promises to pray for the child, support and encourage them in Christian instruction and faith. Jesus urges parents to not to hinder their children but let the little ones come to Him. (cf: Luke 18:16) As brothers and sisters in Christ, we have a responsibility to our children, to our God children, and to our fellow Christians, to love them, support them, and pray for them while encouraging them in their faith. St Paul would remind you that:

"... we are [God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." (Ephesians 2:10)

These works are the fruit of your faith – not the cause of your salvation. As the saying goes, we are saved through faith alone. But genuine faith is never alone.

Jesus says:

"... unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." (Luke 13:3, 5)

True – we are all going to perish. Everyone one of us will die an earthly death – but Jesus provides your means of escape through His gifts of Baptism and the spiritual food and drink of the Lord's Supper, where the righteousness of Christ that was bought and paid for on Calvary's cross is given to you. He has fully paid the wages of your sin. In Christ, you have forgiveness of sin, life, and eternal salvation.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.