

GETTING CLOSE TO JESUS THIS LENT

2. "When We Need to Repent"

Second Sunday in Lent, February 21, 2016

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Today is the second Sunday in Lent and our sermon theme is "Getting closer to Jesus this Lent." Last week we talked about Jesus being tempted in the wilderness by the devil. Jesus is confronted with evil just like you and I are confronted by evil. What do we do when the devil comes calling? Maybe we resist the devil or maybe we say, "How you doing Mr. Devil I haven't seen you for a while?" You know handling the devil like one of those tele-marketers who bug us on the phone. Maybe we want to play with the devil a little bit before we tell the devil to "beat it." In our lesson last week, Jesus doesn't mince words with the devil. He has according to Luke quick answers for all of the devils questions. "One does not live by bread alone," when the devil asked him to turn a stone into bread. "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him," when the devil asked him to fall down and worship the devil and be given the kingdoms of the world. "Do not put the Lord your God to the test," when the devil asked him to throw himself off the top of the Temple to show how powerful God was to rescue him.

Seeing, hearing, watching how Jesus responded to the devil is a clue as to how we might respond when the devil comes a calling on us. Jesus through Luke's gospel gives us a model to follow when temptation comes our way. Be prepared by studying God's word, praying on a regular basis so you are in communication and know God and worshipping God weekly.

Today's lesson in Luke 13 has Jesus and the disciples up in the Galilee. He is among friends and friendly crowds. They have seen him perform miracles, listened to his words, and were beginning to see him as the promised Messiah. With some patriotic bluster they blurt out to him perhaps a story that Jesus didn't know. They tell him about some fellow Galileans who had been killed in Jerusalem at the Temple apparently near the altar where the sheep were being offered as a sacrifice. "They mingled the blood of the Galileans with the blood of the lambs they had brought to sacrifice to God." Isn't that terrible? How could God allow that to happen when they were trying to do a good thing?

What Jesus hears apparently is "Why were these good God-fearing people treated this way?" Why was God punishing these people? Sin and suffering were thought to be a cause and effect kind of thing. If you sinned then you could expect suffering to follow. It was the reasoning that the friends of Job brought to him after his disaster of losing everything he had. "Job, if you confess what you have done wrong, then God may be merciful to you," they said. Job's problem was he didn't think he had done anything wrong.

Jesus then goes one step further and says, "Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think they were worst offenders than anyone who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Remember, Jesus is on a mission to change the world. He comes he says, to “bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to declare the acceptable year of the Lord’s favor.” There is an urgency about Jesus’ message, “Now is the day, this is the hour. Repent! And believe the good news of the gospel!”

So Jesus is not going to get sidetracked with the futile questions about why tragedies happen? Where does evil come from? Why does God allow certain things to happen? Where did God come from? Jesus says here by implication that such questions deflect attention from the primary issue.

Our primary issue, the same as the Jews asking Jesus the question in the first century, is our obligation to live in penitence and trust before God. Penitence and trust are not linked to life’s sorrows and life’s joys. Our job is to ask God for forgiveness, to repent of our sins and to live a life that reflects God’s goodness in our lives. We are in need of repentance most of the time. And we are to trust that God will take care of us and our loved ones. Do we trust that we can place our loved ones in the arms of God for God to care for them and us? Can we trust God with our children and grandchildren with our parents and grandparents? Regardless of what happens God will always be there to pick them up and us up and take care of us. That is what we need to know and trust God with. Life in the kingdom of God is not an elaborate or elevated game of giving favors and avoiding losses. Bad things do happen to good people all the time and the rain falls on the just and the unjust in equal amounts.

When I was in Florida a couple of weeks ago, one of the speakers at the conference said concerning God and faith, “The people in the 16th century believed too much and the people in the 21st century believe too little.” What he meant was in the 16th century people literally worried themselves to death over whether they were right with God or not. Martin Luther constantly fretted over his own sinful life and how and why God would ever forgive him for all of his shortcomings. Today, I don’t hear much talk about sin and its consequences. We have so many other things to worry about like the latest insect driven disease or ISIS or the presidential candidates.

Jesus says, “You are not better or not worse than those who were killed by Pilate’s soldiers or on whom the tower collapsed. You have no control over that. But you do have control over the way you live your life. So repent ... get it ... we are all in need of repentance ... repent or you will perish as they did.

In the classic book, Whatever Became of Sin, there is a scene where a “man is standing on a busy street corner on Michigan Ave. in Chicago. He was plainly dressed and had a stern expression on his face. As he stood there watching the crowds he would slowly raise his right arm and point a bony finger to the nearest person and say, ‘Guilty.’ That was all, just the one word, guilty. Then he would slowly return the arm to his side, wait a few minutes and then raise his arm again and point his bony finger and say the word, ‘guilty.’ He continued this process for several hours as thousands of people hurried by on their way to work, appointments, shopping, strolling along on a sunny afternoon. It had, as you might imagine, an eerie effect upon people. Some were heard to exclaim, ‘How did he know.’”

And then Jesus tells them a short parable. And what do you think the object of the parable will be? Repentance of course. The subject of the teaching of Jesus is followed by an illustration about the subject, repentance.

The parable is about a fig tree. The owner of the fig tree comes looking for fruit. He finds no fruit. The tree is barren. He says to the gardener, "I have come for three years looking for fruit on this tree and each year it has no fruit. It is wasting space in the vineyard. Cut it down!" There is a strong drum beat to cut down the tree. Jesus tells a parable about coming, seeking, and not finding fruit and then it is repeated by the owner of the land. If we stopped right here we would have a parable. It would be a parable about—not producing. What happens when you don't produce? Usually it means you are let go or you don't get into God's kingdom. Either you repent or you perish just like Jesus said. The drum beat even gets stronger when the owner reminds the gardener that he has been coming for three years.

But fortunately for us and the audience that is hearing the parable, there is a second act to this parable. A counterpoint is made by the gardener. "Master," he says, "Leave it alone for another year and let me dig around it and put dung on it and if it makes fruit in the coming year then good ... and if it doesn't then you can cut it down."

In the face of barrenness there is the hope that something good will happen. Isn't that what hope is, in the face of failure hope raises its head and says, "Maybe it will bear fruit." There is little hope for the tree it has had three years, actually probably six years since a fig tree doesn't produce for its first three years. So, it has stood there for six years and for three of them it has produced no fruit. Do you know anyone like that? Anyone like the fig tree who just stands around taking up space and you wonder, when is this person going to get it?

Of course, what is missing is a third act to the parable. What did the master do? Did he allow another year? Did the fig tree produce? If it didn't did he cut it down? Notice that when the master is talking about the tree he says, "Cut it down!" When the gardener is asking for another year he says, "But if it doesn't produce, you can cut it down."

Pleading in the face of a hopeless cause is the basis of hope. Why not another year, it is an easy thing isn't it? But it is more complicated than that. Why is Jesus talking about a fig tree in this parable anyway? Well, the Old Testament is full of places where the fig tree and producing fruit stands for the nation of Israel. It is the tree of blessing, it is the tree of the future. It stands not only for Israel's golden past but also for its future. But the tree is barren, it is fruitless whereas the expectation is that it will be fruitful. The fruitful tree is a blessing and the barren tree is a curse.

What will the outcome be? The implication is that God will delay judgment so that more will have the opportunity to repent. There is still time. God's mercy is still in serious conversation with God's judgment.

So if we want to get closer to Jesus this Lent what is the passage saying to us? If God is giving us more time to be faithful then what are we going to do with that time? The parable says that Jesus has a claim on your life, a claim that can be exercised at will. Your life is not your own. It is not

your own to fritter away in any way you choose. The parable says we have to pay our dues. We have to pay for the space that we occupy. There are only so many square feet upon the earth and the Lord takes note of who is doing what. The hairs on your head are numbered. It seems funny but it is true. A sparrow does not fall from the sky that God does not take note. Not one life is to be wasted. Not one year or month or week or day or minute or moment. It all belongs to the purposes of God on the day that God created it all.

The people came to Jesus and wanted to talk about the Galileans who had died, the atrocities that Pilate and the Roman guard had committed. They wanted Jesus to point his finger and say guilty. But Jesus would have none of it. He was not going to allow them to deflect attention from the primary point, penitence and trust in God.. The fig tree had been a disappointment for a long time. But, maybe there was still time! Were they going to clean up their act or not? They still had time. We still have time.