

Epworth Chapel on the Green
March 24, 2019
Third Sunday in Lent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Exodus 3:1-15
Psalm 103:1-22
I Corinthians 10:1-13
Luke 13:1-9

Our Gospel lesson today is challenging for many reasons, one of which is that this story occurs only in Luke, and nowhere else in the Gospels. In addition, we are briefly introduced to two groups of people who meet a tragic end, and then nothing more is said about them.

In the first case, Jesus is told of some Galileans who had gone up to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices, but were murdered by Pontius Pilate. This would be consistent from what is known about Pilate's brutality, and the crowd is probably trying to solicit Jesus' opinion about the Roman occupation.

In the second case, Jesus refers to a tragedy that had occurred when eighteen people lost their lives when a tower collapsed near the pool of Siloam in Jerusalem.

Cases like these that involved tragedy and misfortune usually brought to the surface a common view among the people that folks who experienced these kinds of tragedies were greater sinners than most, and perhaps even deserved what happened to them.

Jesus quickly dispels this notion by saying: "These people were no better or worse than any others. And unless **you** repent, you will also perish."

Jesus' words here are a summons to people of every age. They are a summons to us. They are a summons to *readiness* and *repentance*. We do not know when our life will be demanded of us. We do not know when our life will end, whether because of accident, human malice, or another reason.

Barely more than two weeks ago, I received a call from a friend in Florida. He called to tell me that a friend of ours who had ministered in the church Connie and I attended when we were students in Kentucky had dropped dead of a heart attack that morning. One minute he is reading a passage of Scripture and posting it on his Facebook page, and a few minutes later he is on the floor dead.

I learned this week of a 40 year old mother of four, a schoolteacher in suburban Washington, D.C.; she was tutoring a student and fainted. Her husband took her home, and decided to take her to the Emergency Room. She wanted to take a quick shower before they went, and she dropped dead in the shower.

Life is fleeting. Life is so very fragile. All of life is under the judgment of God, *and unless you and I repent we are lost, and **all** is lost.*

To illustrate this, Jesus tells a parable about a fig tree that doesn't produce fruit. In view of what Jesus has just said to the crowd, the application seems clear. God patiently waits to see if *we* will repent and bear fruit in *our* lives.

God waits to see if we will respond to His offer of grace to "go beyond our minds," to learn to see things from His point of view. He waits to see if we

respond to grace so that the things that break His heart break our hearts also. He watches to see if our lives “bear fruit in keeping with repentance.”

A person’s life that does not bear fruit becomes like the fig tree in the parable. The owner of the vineyard who planted the fig tree will “cut it down.” That is, one’s individual life will at some point be demanded of that person.” (cf. Luke 12:20 and the parable of the Rich Fool.)

Jesus’ words here bear a resemblance to those of John the Baptist, who said, “Every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:9).

Now, while there is a *personal* application to Jesus’ parable here, the historical context also requires that we see the parable first of all as referring to Israel.

Notice that the fig tree is planted in a “vineyard,” which was a common symbol for Israel in the Old Testament. One such place is Isaiah 5:1-7, which also mentions a tower and inhabitants of Jerusalem, like Jesus does here.

The owner of the vineyard may represent God, or it may also refer to Jesus, since the gardener refers to him as “sir” or “Lord.” The three years may refer to the three years of Jesus’ public ministry. And, identifying Jesus with the one who comes in search of fruit on a fig tree correlates with the tradition of Jesus actually

doing so. (Cf. Matthew 21:19 and Mark 11:13, where Jesus looks for figs on a fig tree but the fig tree is barren.)

So, while the warnings about the need for individuals to repent and live in a state of readiness are important, I think Luke is also using this story to warn about the impending judgment on Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple (which occurs in A.D. 70). The gardener's plea for one more year so that he may fertilize the fig tree offers hope that there is one last chance for repentance, but time is clearly running out.

On this third Sunday of Lent, Jesus stands in our midst and confronts us once again with the truth that repentance is not a one-time event, but a life-long process. The Lenten season reminds us that we are constantly called to see things differently, to see others differently, to go beyond our minds and to think like God thinks.

And it reminds us that at any moment our life can be demanded of us. At any moment our little tree can be cut down. Life is not about currying favor and avoiding loss. All of life is under God's judgment. And unless we repent, all is lost, and we are lost.

As we come to the Lord's Table, let us do so with a renewed appreciation for the fragility and brevity of our lives. Let us receive the grace he offers us here with humble thanksgiving, knowing that it can help us to bear fruit in keeping with

repentance, and to be prepared for that unexpected time when our life will be demanded of us.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.