

Repentance or Judgement, Which Will it Be?

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Lent

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May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in your sight oh Lord my strength and redeemer. Amen

Today we have reached the halfway point of our Lenten journey for this year. In just three short weeks we will be celebrating Palm Sunday and then that glorious of all Sundays, EASTER.

In today's gospel reading we have two little stories. Verses 1 thru 5 could be called Repent or Perish or Who's Sins Were Greater. In verses 6 thru 9 God gives Israel an Extension to Repent. Both stories call the people to repentance.

In verse 1, Luke tells us "Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices." The Galileans were killed by Pilate. Jesus responded by asking the crowd if those Galileans who died, were worse sinners than other Galileans, and Jesus answered for them with a resounding NO! He did not seem to be sympathetic for those who died in the temple. I think He

was irritated that the crowd may have thought the ones who died, died because of their sins. Nowhere else in the Bible is there a mention of Pilate killing Galileans or about the tower of Siloam falling and killing 18 people.

The Galileans were most likely killed because Pilate thought they were plotting against Rome when all they were doing was offering up sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem.

Then Jesus tells the crowd about the people who died because the tower of Siloam fell on them. Again, it may have been thought their sins were the cause of their deaths and God was punishing them; but again, Jesus asked the crowd if those who died were more guilty than the others who lived in Jerusalem. But before the crowd could answer, He replied with a firm NO!

These two incidents I just mentioned reminded me when, I was preparing for today's sermon, of two sad incidences that happened a few years ago where people lost their lives for no reason. The first was the shooting in Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, S.C. on 6/17/15 where 9 people died and the second was at First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, TX where more than two dozen people died and 20 were wounded on 11/10/17. These people did not die because of their sins, it was because of another person's. These two incidents were heinous acts committed by sinners.

Sadly, the world is full of evil and always has been since Adam and Eve ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. We are all surrounded by tragedy in our daily lives.

Evil has been present in the world for a long time and is always disturbing for those who experience it. Tragedy encircles us and we all wonder as did those in the crowd Jesus was addressing, whose fault was it? In the ancient world people were slow to blame evil on their god's carelessness or noninvolvement in their lives. They most likely believed in evil spiritual forces, but for the most part assumed that tragedy or misfortune was the result of God's judgement or punishment for the sins the people committed. The people thought if tragedy came the responsibility was with the person who experienced the tragedy or misfortune. These thoughts are what led Jesus to respond to the comments about the recent tragedies. Jesus took these assumptions and used them as an opportunity for the people in the crowd to reflect upon their sins and mortality.

Often in the Old Testament, when tragedy struck, people thought a bad event happened as a result of sin. That is what the friends of Job thought. Job was a good man but, God kept testing him.

Before the crowd had a chance to respond to Jesus, He made it personal for them and told them "No! But unless **YOU** repent, **YOU** too will all perish. He said this twice to them. Mortality has been with the world since Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Gen. 3:3 says" but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" NIV

In today's Gospel reading Jesus never let the question get off track. He kept the people thinking about their own sinful nature or state.

Jesus wanted the people, and that includes us, to face our own mortality and not when we will die. On Ash Wednesday when Fr. John and I placed ashes on your foreheads you heard the words "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

When it comes to sin, sin is sin in the eyes of God. Now for humans it is a different story, but we are not concerned with that today. Jesus confirmed that there was no difference in sin when He told the people No! when they asked about who sinned the most. He turns things right back to them and tells them **they** must repent or **they** will suffer. He said in LK 13:3 "But, unless you repent, you too will all perish."

We are all going to die but we don't have to separate ourselves from God and Heaven. There are two types of death. There is physical death and then there is spiritual death.

In the mind of the Israelis sin and judgement were closely related. They thought those who suffered more were worse sinners. It is not very comforting to believe that suffering is the result of sin.

Now the story in verses 6 thru 9 takes us to a vineyard where there is a fig tree growing. The vineyard is the world and the lone fig tree represents the people in Israel. The listeners

already knew that because the Old Testament uses vines and vineyards a number of times. For instance, in Micah 7:1 “What misery is mine! I am like one who gathers summer fruit at the gleaning of the vineyard; there is no cluster of grapes to eat, none of the early figs that I crave.” NIV In this verse Micah had lost hope in society. He was not able to find an upright person anywhere. Society tried to rationalize sin back then and it still does today.

When Jesus told the parable in verses 6-9 about the fig tree in the vineyard that hadn't yielded any fruit in three years, He was referring to Isaiah 5:1-7. Isaiah's lesson of the vineyard in his writing told us that Israel was to bear fruit, but her fruit did not last for long. The fruit she was to bear was to carry out God's work to uphold justice. In Luke's story of the vineyard God granted Israel another year to repent or face the consequences. If they didn't repent, the gardener, Jesus, would have had no choice but to take the ax from the garden shed and start chopping. There will be no further negotiating possible.

The people had already been given three years to repent but God decides to let them have another year. A period of grace was extended for one year. God's goodness and graciousness should not be taken for granted or presumed. Israel continued to take God for granted. Throughout the Old Testament God continuously gave the Israelites extensions to repent and change their behavior.

Let's not focus on who sinned more but, on the point, Jesus made in verse 3 when He said, "Unless you repent, you too will all perish." ^{NIV} Jesus wanted the crowd to realize that if they did not repent, they were going to die. Not a physical death which we all face, but a spiritual death. Spiritual death would keep them from experiencing the fullness of the life God had in store for them as well as for all of us. We will always fall short and will never be satisfied and content with what we have. We will also be consumed at times with bitterness and anger, worry and have anxieties. But thanks be to God, He has made it possible for us to have eternal life with Him.

Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come. All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." ^{NIV}

And in Romans 12:2 Paul warns us when he says "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—His good, pleasing,

and perfect will.” NIV What Paul was telling his readers and us is that we cannot let society, and that includes social media and Hollywood among others telling us, how to live or what is right or wrong. Some denominations have let society dictate what they should believe and teach. That is the devil talking and we need to be watchful as 1 Peter tells us in chapter 5:8-9 “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith.” NIV

There is a word that is often used by those who read and study theology and that word is Metanoia. Metanoia means change in one’s way of life resulting from penitence or spiritual conversion. In the New Testament repentance shows up 20 times. It is one of the most important words in the New Testament. God calls us to METANOIA, to turn away from the ways of the world and walk in Christ’s footsteps. He wants us to hold in our lives the Gospel and to proclaim it to others and that truth will lead us and others to change or METANOIA.

One of the purposes of Lent and benefits of these 40 days is for us to have a time to reflect and think about changes we need to make in our lives. We should think of Lent as a time for us to embrace the grace of **repentance**. For us to get back on track and live our lives as disciples and ambassadors for Christ.

One of my favorite hymns, Amazing Grace, written by John Newton tells it like it is.

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me;
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.

There are a number of ways we can get back on track during Lent and one was recommended by Fr. John a couple of weeks ago and that was to read one chapter a day from John’s gospel. I suggest reading it slowly and meditate upon it. This is a method called Lectio Divina. Lectio Divina is a traditional monastic practice of scriptural reading, meditation and prayer intended to promote communion with God and to increase the knowledge of God’s word. Another suggestion is to read the Psalm Jesus said while on the Cross, Psalm 22. Read it slowly and ponder on it.

O God, who by Thy care and counsel for mankind hast moved Thy Church to appoint this holy season wherein the hearts of those who seek Thee may receive Thy help and healing: we beseech Thee, Savior of our souls and bodies, to purify us by Thy discipline, that, abiding in Thee and Thou in us, we may grow in grace and in the knowledge of Thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN