

Sermon: Repent or Perish?
3 Lent, Year C
Luke 13:1-9

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In my HarperCollins Study Bible, the first section of today's passage from Luke's Gospel is titled, "Repent or Perish." It sounds pretty drastic, pretty severe and extreme, doesn't it? We hear of two incidents that don't make much sense to us, kind of as if we have walked into a local conversation already in progress. One strange story of Pilate, the local governor of the area, commingling blood with the locals' sacrifices. And a mention of a tower of Siloam falling on and killing eighteen people. Scholars don't seem to know much about these incidents as they are unattested in other historical resources, but maybe the more important point was that Jesus is saying that the suffering and deaths of those effected, wasn't due to their sinfulness. A common assumption at the time and place of Jesus was that pain and affliction were the result of God's punishment for their sin. Jesus is responding to that assumption, "Nuhuh. Not having it." "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than other Galileans?" "No, I tell you."

And wouldn't it be nice if Jesus just left it at that? O.K. So we aren't punished for our sinfulness (which is a very good thing because if we are truly honest with ourselves we will know we are deeply sinful creatures). Jesus is saying, "Bad things sometimes just happen." But then leaving us scratching our heads, Jesus says, "but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." Jesus won't settle for simple answers to the deep and complex questions of life. While we may accept Jesus' words that we don't suffer or die due to the fact that we are more sinful than anyone else, what then did he mean that unless we repent we will perish?

There are limits to what we know and can know about God and about ourselves. But maybe Luke's following words about the fig tree and the gardener can shed some new light on our relationship with God. It seems that the owner of the vineyard finds no fruit on his fig tree and demands that it be cut down. I mean, aren't fig trees supposed to produce figs? (I think many of us frustrated fig growers here in Staunton can actually relate!) Why keep it at all if it isn't producing figs, the very thing it is meant to do? "Cut it down!" he says. "Why should it be wasting soil?" But the gardener pleads mercy; he pleads that the owner give it a bit more time. "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 is willing to take his best step now not knowing exactly what the future holds.

There is a sense of urgency in these words. One more try! As Jesus uses the situation of the garden, the fig tree as an example of the relationship between God and us, I wonder about our own relationship with the rest of God's creation. In the beginning, God created a beautiful earth as a place for us to live. In Genesis 1 we remember, "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." Are we caring for it the way God has intended?

We read this week that plastics will discontinue being recycled locally, which is part of a bigger nationwide concern since China stopped accepting our plastic. While it was tempting to skip

right over this article and go straight to the UVA basketball scores, the National Weather Service also reported that the floods in South Dakota and Iowa could reach historic levels soon. In southern Africa 500 people died in a highly unusual cyclone and flooding in Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

We are seeing drastic sea level changes in Alaska and in the Bahamas and experiencing stronger storms. Eight entire islands in the Pacific have already disappeared in recent years. Climate change is clearly upon us. Most environmentalists say time is of the essence for us to pay deeper attention to our environment. Many of the best scientists say that we risk destabilizing the earth's climate if we don't mobilize a complete conversion from fossil fuels to green energy within the next decade or so. There is an urgency in those words. "Repent or perish?"

We have used and sometimes abused the environment that has been entrusted to us and as followers of Christ we are called to wake up, to pay attention to what is going on around us. Whether you are black or white, American or Haitian, Democrat or Republican, we all breathe the same air, we all need clean water, and we all need decent food to eat. And while we here in Staunton have not been adversely affected – yet - by climate change, except by our record hot summers, if we open our eyes and ears to others in so many other parts of our planet, we must recognize that change is happening; and along with it, so often it is the poor and marginalized who suffer from it. Do we deny this? The problem will increase if we do nothing.

"Repent or perish?" To repent means to turn, to change one's mind. Might our attitudes toward the earth and its atmosphere need a changing of our collective mind? Might this situation with climate change be an opportunity to think about how we use God's resources? How we treat the poor and the disadvantaged? Perhaps the fig gardener is attempting to help us wake up. Maybe he is digging around the hardness of our hearts and the sleepiness of our minds, and placing the much needed fertilizer around us, that we might be open to change.

It will take great humility to make changes. St. Augustine of Hippo said that the manure in the garden represents humility. Sounds fair enough! Fortunately we can rely on the humility of Christ, the caring gardener, to help us. The Christ who humbly gave himself, his very life, for all of us. Lent is a season of repentance, or turning around toward Christ, the one whom we are able to trust. If we are willing to make changes, to repent, Jesus promises we will have life.

We are part of and dependent on an intricately connected web of life. What we do directly or indirectly affects someone or something else. Nature reflects so much about our Creator God. Can we pay better attention to nature? John Muir, the great 19th century naturalist, and advocate for the environment, said, "*When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.*" "*When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world.*"

Earth and all of the universe is created by God. It is sacred and holy ground – all of it! We need to look at nature and talk about the environment. How can we make this world a better place? It will mean stepping out in faith. Dr. Benjamin Mays, president of Morehouse College (Bishop Curry's paraphrase) says, "Faith is taking your best step and leaving the rest to God."

Maybe our best step is to look and listen, to notice our own habits and begin to adjust them according to what seems best for our environment. Many of the answers aren't yet clear, but God calls us to be resilient, adaptive, creative and innovative as we seek a way forward. Can the urgency of our planet's needs be met with the eager eyes of faith? As followers of Jesus we can take our lead from the Master gardener, saying "Give us another chance, dear Lord." May we be receptive to the extravagant mercy of our God, and may we humbly move forward. Like the fig gardener, may we take our best steps and leave the rest to God.
Amen.