

Preacher: **Pastor Twyla**

Scripture: **Luke 13:1-9**

¹ There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² And Jesus answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? ³ I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. ⁴ Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? ⁵ I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish."

⁶ He also spoke this parable: "A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. ⁷ Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?' ⁸ But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. ⁹ And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.'"

A pastor and his wife were driving to visit Grandma and Grandpa for Christmas. Their daughter Rachel asked the inevitable question, "Are we almost there?"

The father said, "No we are still 150 miles away."

She asked, "Well, how long is that?"

"Well Rachel, it's about three more hours."

She didn't say anything for a few moments as she thought about what three hours must be. She leaned forward from the backseat to the front, making sure she could see her mother's face and said, "Mommy, is that as long as one of Daddy's sermons?"

Waiting—it's not always the easiest thing to do, is it? Yet wait—we must sometimes—usually more often than we like. We want things we have planned to happen immediately, without flaws. We demand answers to our questions: yesterday, not tomorrow! We expect expediency to our requests for orders we make, repairs we may need for something and attention for our physical need. And why shouldn't we expect it? We live in a culture that pushes fast service in order to be productive and improve earnings. Our technology generates information and provides services that accommodates and further fuels this feeling of immediacy.

We discover a different attitude towards waiting in the scriptures. Many stories in the Bible illustrate moments when people needed to wait. For example, remember Abram, whom we talked about last week. He and Sarai had to wait quite some time for God to fulfill his promise to them that they would have a child. Yet in the same story, we learn that Abram doesn't fool around when God calls him to pack everything and head out to a place where he would lead Abram. In the end, not without challenges, God's promise was fulfilled. The scripture reading for today includes a message to us about waiting—the discernment of when to wait and when not to wait.

This scripture follows shortly after a time of teaching that we read about in chapter 12:54-59, when Jesus, once again said, that he would leave this world but would return sometime in the future. He said that a kingdom was being prepared for his followers. And one day, when he returns, he will take his followers to be with him in this kingdom.

This involves waiting, for a time when Jesus will return. Jesus instructs his followers, however, that while they wait, they should be actively seeking and building their relationship

with God, following Christ's example of serving others, and helping to build God's kingdom with believers. Luke tells us that Jesus warns that even in the waiting for his return there is a required immediacy in preparing for his return.

Then when we get to today's scripture, Jesus' message takes on a more urgent tone. It comes on the heels of some questions brought to him surrounding two tragedies that occurred. The stories leave out a lot of the facts surrounding the disasters, but theologians considered the history of the time and speculate about what happened. Research offers varying possibilities of these tragedies, but what is clear is that Jesus and the people he was talking with were familiar with the events of these tragedies.

I offer you, a common thread describing the events they were discussing. The first is in reference to a water problem in Jerusalem that Pilate decided, rightly so, needed to be fixed. He decided to finance it with temple monies. The Jews were up in arms over that idea, and they gathered to protest it. As they gathered, Pilate instructed his soldiers to disguise themselves by wearing cloaks over their battle garb and under their garb they were to carry cudgels, a short thick stick, which they were to use to disperse the crowd when the signal was given. Unfortunately, the soldiers got a little carried away and many people were killed, some of which were Galileans. The Jews wondered whether the Galileans at this protest were killed because they were sinners.

The second disaster involved eighteen people who decided to work on the building of the aqueducts for Pilate. The Jews were already upset that Pilate stole temple money to build the aqueducts, and now some of their own people were helping to build them. The Jews believed that a tower in Siloam fell on these people because they consented to help with the project.

The people asked Jesus after reminding him of these: "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" Those asking the question would have believed that those who died at these two events died as a punishment for their sinfulness. They also believed that one could suffer as a result of their parents' sins.

The notion that disaster comes as punishment for sin is found elsewhere in the Old Testament, especially in the blessings and warnings of Deuteronomy 28-30. It also appears in John 9:2, where we read that Jesus was asked whether a particular man was blind because of his own sin or the sin of his parents. Jesus answered saying the man's blindness had nothing to do with either's sin. He pointed out the reality that you and I know, that even good people experience suffering.

The beliefs held by the people confronting Jesus about these two tragedies were cruel and heartbreaking doctrines. In this text, Jesus neither disputes or affirms the connection between sin and disaster. There is no blanket principle to this quandary. Clearly, sometimes sin does result in tragedy, brought on by our own choices, not necessarily God's punishment. And other adversities come on by accident.

Jesus appears less interested in clearing up this dilemma; and has a more essential point to make. His response to those listening to him that day pointed out that the people killed in both of the tragedies they brought to Jesus' attention were no more sinners than those, standing before him, asking him about this. But for those killed in those tragedies, time had run out for them to repent of their sins. And so, he goes on to warn them again to repent before it's too late.

There's a sense of urgency in Jesus' call to repentance for the people listening to him that day, and for all people throughout all of time. The warning is just as real for us: repentance cannot be delayed, for death may come at any time. Repentance needs to be an ongoing attitude toward one's life, rather than an occasional act.

Death is not something most of us relish thinking about a lot. It's usually on the back burner of our consciousness, unless we are getting older and we know our time in this lifetime is limited, or unless we are facing our own or a loved one's life-threatening illness, or unless we lose a loved one, it's especially troubling to many of us when death comes to someone of a young age. When we lose someone, we become more aware of how fragile life is; and it is brought to our attention that we should live each day to its fullest.

Lent also reminds us that this life is temporary. Particularly, on Ash Wednesday we are reminded that it was from dust that we were created by God, and one day we will return to dust. It's in-between the two where we find ourselves waiting, most times not consciously. Like the people killed in the tragedies previously mentioned, we do not always have a warning for when our time in this lifetime will come to an end.

Jesus does not say that we should be obsessed with fear and panic about death. In fact, his call to ongoing repentance relieves our anxieties because we know then that when the time comes for us to leave this lifetime, we will move onto an eternal lifetime in the place that has been prepared for us. Jesus does not want us to miss out on the joys and blessings we receive while living in this lifetime; but he also wants us to prepare ourselves for the future kingdom.

Jesus went on to tell a parable about an unproductive fig tree. The owner of the fig tree determines that the tree should be cut down, as it was taking up fertile space where another, more productive tree could grow. The gardener, on the other hand, makes a plea for the tree, asking to give the tree another year in which to produce fruit. He would dig around the tree and fertilize it, giving it the best chance possible to produce. If it still did not produce, then he too agreed that it should be cut down and removed.

Through this parable, we are to understand that there is more than one chance to repent, perhaps softening the blow of urgency. But at the same time, the second chances will come to an end eventually, and no one knows when that will be.

There was a farmer who had three sons: Ron, Don and Little John. All had their names on the church roll but none ever attended church or had time for God. Then one day Don was bitten by a rattlesnake. The doctor was called and he did all he could to help Don, but the outlook for his recovery was very dim indeed. So, the pastor was called and apprised of the situation. The pastor arrived, and began to pray as follows: "O wise and righteous Father, we thank Thee that in Thine wisdom thou didst send this rattlesnake to bite Don. He hasn't been inside the church in years and has shown little interest in You. We trust that this experience will be a valuable lesson to him and will lead to his genuine repentance. And now, O Father, wilt thou send another rattlesnake to bite Ron, and another to bite Little John, and another really big one to bite the old man. For years we have done everything we know to get them to get serious with Thee. Thank you, God, for rattlesnakes. (vs.3)

The parable of the fig tree makes the clear point that repentance and productivity are expected. Repentance not only removes the filth of sin from our lives through God's forgiveness, but it launches us into action. It's through repentance that we recognize our need for God. This need drives our hunger to know God, to seek him out, to have the soil of our lives turned over and fertilized by His Word and His presence in our lives. We are to be productive in availing ourselves to the nurturing of our faith and in our relationship with God.

When Abraham Lincoln was a boy he husked corn for three days to pay for a second-hand copy of "The Life of Washington." After he had read the book he said, "I don't always intend to delve, grub, shuck corn, split rails, and the like."

"What do you want to be now?" asked Mrs. Crawford.

"I'll be president!" Lincoln replied.

"You'll make a purty president with all your tricks and jokes now, wouldn't you," was her response.

Not about to be discouraged young Abe said, "I'll study and get ready, and the chance will come."

The chance came and Lincoln became one of the greatest Presidents in the history of our Nation.

Repentance not only demands change in our personal lives; but it also propels us into action, to be productive, in the work of building God's Kingdom here on earth. In regards to this effort, the parable seems to speak to the virtue of patience, to withhold judgment on others, and instead help others to know what it really means to have a relationship with God. Just as God has done for us in giving us second chances, he expects us to do the same for others. All the while we need to be aware of the fact, with sadness, that there is only so much that we can do to lead others to Christ. The final decision is theirs.

There is a time to wait and then there are times when waiting may lead to being too late. Almost with urgency in his cry to us, Jesus tells us not to wait to repent, as often as we may need, everyday, repent of our sin. Along with repentance, we are to be changed and reshaped, as we live each day according to God's will, being alert and diligent in the care and nurturing of our own faith, as well as helping others find Jesus before it is too late for them, even as we wait for Christ's return for us. Yes, we are living in days of waiting, not without hope and the promise of new life everlasting; but with joy and anticipation, fulfilling each day with purpose and meaning, until that day. Amen.