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THE NECESSARY FRUIT OF REPENTANCE
Luke 13:1-9; Lent 3C; March 22-23, 2025

One of the blessings of living in our nation is having the right to freely believe in and worship God; the government is not allowed to tell us who to worship or how to worship. I make these comments at the five-year anniversary of the government's order to shut down society for two weeks to "flatten the curve" during the Covid-19 pandemic, which included churches ordered closed and members not allowed to worship together.

The government authorities scared us into obedience with their dire predictions of the sky-high death rates and coerced people into mRNA shots when they became available. Anyone who questioned any of this was accused of causing deaths by spreading dangerous "misinformation." Government power was used to take away our ability to speak and worship freely. It has taken five years, but we might actually be allowed to openly question what happened and determine what was done right or wrong to deal with this disease. With this experience and knowledge, churches might respond differently the next time the government orders them closed.

Obviously, that's my opinion about what happened – it's not the Word of God – and others will have differing opinions, but this is an example from our recent past when the governing authorities used force shut down worship.

In our Gospel Reading, some people pointed out to Jesus an example not only of governmental force against God's people, but actual violence, the killing of Galilean Jews gathered to worship at the temple in Jerusalem. They were probably there for the Passover, the sacrificing of the lambs to celebrate God redeeming the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. We aren't told why Pontius Pilate, the Roman military governor of Judea, sent in his troops, but it is possible that there were anti-Roman protests going on. The Jews of Jesus' day longed to be free from Roman rule and have a king in the line of David sit on the throne again. Many people hoped that Jesus would be that king and overthrow Roman rule. Whatever was going on, the soldiers slaughtered those Jews while worshipping God, mingling their blood with the blood of the sacrificed lambs.

Something comparable for us would be if, as we were kneeling at the Communion rail eating and drinking Christ's body and blood, government troops broke into church and mowed us down with machine guns. The blood of Christ, the Lamb of God, we were drinking from the chalice and cups spilled on the church carpet and mingled with the blood that poured from our now lifeless bodies. I pray that never happens here, but we need to know that such things have happened in the history of the Christian Church, still happen today in parts of the world, and will continued to happen and get worse right up the end the world and Christ's return in glory.

How did Jesus respond to hearing about the slaughter of the worshipping Jews at the temple? He added His own example of a deadly tragedy. The tower in Siloam in Jerusalem collapsed and killed 18 Jews. Jesus' application to both incidents was the same: **“Do you think that they were worse sinners/offenders than all the others...? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”**

Jesus emphasizes here the necessity of repentance of sins, not looking for the cause of these tragedies to attach blame. Jesus did not even condemn Pilate for what he did, nor did He say that the Jews he slaughtered while worshipping were worse sinners than the rest of the Galileans. Those killed by the tower collapsing were not worse sinners because they died at God's hand in this natural disaster – God is still in control, causing and allowing disasters to happen. When bad things like these happen it is not our job to look for someone who sinned to blame but be warned that we need to repent of our own sin or else perish at God's hand at the final judgment.

Jesus told a parable to emphasize His point: **“A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, ‘Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?’ And he answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year...but if not, you can cut it down.’”**

We should hear in Jesus' words both the warning that we must repent of our sins or face the consequences – we don't know when God's judgment will happen so we better not put off repenting – and words of grace – God has given us time right now to repent, so we should use this opportunity. Some of my favorite words in Scripture emphasize this: God **“is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love”** (Ex 34:6; Nu 14:18; Ps 86:15; etc.), which is found in multiple places in the Bible. And **“The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance”** (2 Pt 3:9).

What is godly repentance? There are basically two aspects to repentance. First, that we recognize and admit that we are sinners with sorrow in our hearts and regret for our sins. Second, that we turn from our sin and turn toward Jesus in faith for the forgiveness of our sins, seeking to live as the Christians God has called us to be. True repentance always includes both aspects.

Being sorry for our sins, which is sometimes called “contrition,” is not enough by itself. Lots of people are sorry for what they have done. Sometimes it's because they got caught and are in trouble; they are sorry they are suffering the consequences, not that they actually did anything wrong. Anger toward those who are accusing them and holding them accountable is a typical response to this kind of sorrow. There is often no desire to stop sinning in that way, only the attempt not to get caught at it the next time.

Others are truly sorry for their sins, regret them terribly and the consequences of them, and they attempt to make up for what they have done wrong. It is good and right that we try to make up for what we have done wrong, make amends, but there is nothing we can do that can change or take away the hurts we have caused to others or ourselves. Sins cannot be undone by us, as if we never committed them; there is nothing we can do to pay for our sins. We should be sorry for them, but what we end up are sorry sinners still in our sins.

True sorrow for sins accepts the blame for what was done without excuses, regrets it and does not want to continue in sin. It wants to do better, do whatever can be done to make amends, but believes that nothing we can do undoes sin or and makes our sin go away.

With contrite hearts, our only hope is Jesus Christ. We turn away from our sins and toward Jesus in faith, who suffered and died on the cross for our sins as the only sacrifice acceptable to God. Only the blood of Jesus, the spotless and perfect Lamb of God, can wash away our sins. Our sins against God, others, and even ourselves can only be covered by God Himself who became man to save mankind.

During this season of Lent, we are reminded that now is the time for repentance and faith in Jesus as the only Savior from sin and death. Four weeks from now it will be Easter, but first will come Good Friday and our yearly remembrance of Jesus' Passion, suffering and death. How did Jesus end up at the cross?

We confessed our faith using the Apostles' Creed earlier, saying that Jesus Christ, God's only Son our Lord, "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried." Jesus was in Jerusalem for the last Passover, the slaughter and sacrificing of lambs in remembrance of God's redemption of His people, and the same Pontius Pilate mingled the blood of God's Son Jesus, who also came from Galilee, with the blood of those Passover lambs. Jesus is the very Paschal Lamb of God.

When we are looking around for someone to blame for sin, especially someone we might consider a worse sinner than ourselves, we should **"fix our eyes on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame"** (Heb 12:2; Gradual). Jesus became the worst sinner of all carrying the sins of all, especially our sins, to the cross.

In the parable of the fig tree, the **man who planted** the vineyard represents God the Father, and the **fig tree** in the vineyard signifies all of us sinners. An **unfruitful tree**, a sinner who does not repent, should be chopped down. The **vinedresser** who asked to spare that tree for another year, is Jesus, the Son of God, who begged His Father for patience, to give sinners time to repent and not perish. The parable doesn't tell us what happened in terms of repentance, but we know what happened to God's Son: He went to Jerusalem to be chopped down in death for the sins of all sinners, repentant or not, and rose from the dead to declare us forgiven.

What is the necessary fruit of repentance that we must produce? To be sorry for our sins and turn away from them by faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins. The parable shows how **God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love**, shown by sending His Son to save us. **God is patient toward [us], not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.** Now is the time to repent and believe in Jesus. Amen.