

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Luke 13:1-9 (NRSV)

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

[2] He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? [3] No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. [4] Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them--do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? [5] No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

[6] Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. [7] So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?'

[8] He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. [9] If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.' "

A SERMON INTERRUPTED

Preacher Tom Long told a story that they used to tell in the South Georgia church of his youth. The tale involved a certain Sunday night in October 1938.

"Evening prayer services were in full swing when a man named Sam, a member of the congregation who lived down the road from the church, charged into the prayer meeting trembling with fear and excitement. Finally gaining the breath to speak, he shouted, "Martians are attacking the earth in spaceships! Some of 'em have already landed in New Jersey!"

The preacher halted in mid-sentence; the congregation stared at Sam blankly. "I s-s-swear," he stammered, now a little unsure of his footing. "I h-h-heard it on the radio."

What Sam had heard, of course, was Orson Welles's now infamous Mercury Theater radio production of *War of the Worlds*, but no one in the congregation was aware of that at the moment. For all they knew, the world outside was coming to a flaming end.

The little flock looked apprehensively at the preacher, but he was mute and indecisive, never having had a sermon disrupted by interplanetary invasion.

Finally one of the oldest members of the congregation, a red-clay farmer of modest education, stood up, gripped the pew in front of him with his large, callused hands, and said, "I 'speck what Sam says ain't completely true, but if it is true, we're in the right place here in church. Let's go on with the meetin'." And so they did."

That farmer with his rough hewn theology of the Providence of God was better than most at reading the signs of the times. He knew what really mattered and what didn't.

But, that's not the case for most of us. We tend to major in minors; we pour our life into things that are, in the final analysis, not that important.

Jesus told the people of his day that they were far better at meteorology than they were at theology. They could predict when a storm or a heat wave was coming, but they had no clue about what God was about to do. When it came to God's kingdom they were asleep at the switch. Luke 12:56 (NRSV)

I think the same can pretty much be said about our generation as well. By and large we are a very unreflective lot.

FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

But, on occasion something happens that makes us glad to worship. A terrorist attack awakens the spirituality of a whole nation. A personal tragedy reminds us of our own mortality, that one day the bell will toll for us. And we wonder, "Are we ready for that day?"

Every funeral has this element of personal involvement. We mourn not only for the loved one who has died, but we also mourn for ourselves. We are reminded that one day we too will come to the same end and people will weep for us.

That's why people talk so much about tragedies. They evoke a sense of fear and morbid fascination. We may even wonder, "How much time do I have left? Could an unspeakable tragedy like this happen in my life? What's this world coming to? What's my world coming to?"

Does that sound familiar? Many of us play "ain't it awful" as we watch the evening news, but we still watch. And those who broadcast the news know it. That old saying "if it bleeds it leads" is still true. We might say that we want good news, but the news we watch and the news we talk about is the really bad news.

Often the tragedies occur in some other place or in a bad neighborhood where we expect "that kind of thing". But, when the tragedy strikes close to home, when it hits someone that we know, we have a harder time putting it out of our mind.

We begin to ask the "why" question. Why did that plane crash and kill all of those innocent people? Why did that Marine and his fellow soldiers die at the hands of a suicide bomber just before they were to return home? Why did my friend die of a heart attack at age 38, just when his career was about to take off?

THE LESSON OF TRAGEDY

Those questions are sort of like the question they asked Jesus long ago. They said,

"Jesus, did you hear the news? Some Galileans were killed by Pilate while they were in the temple. And their blood was mingled with the blood of the animals that were sacrificed that day. This is a terrible sacrilege. What did these men do to deserve this? Why did this happen? Is this some kind of sign? Are we living in the last days?"

But, Jesus refuses to answer their question. Instead, he said in effect,

“Do you think that there is rhyme or reason to violence or tragedy? Don’t think that those who lost their lives deserved what they got. They were no worse sinners than anyone else.

On the contrary, you should view this as a warning. Life is short and unpredictable. Despite your best laid plans, something like this could happen to you as well.

Even if you don’t get into trouble with Pilate, think about what happened to those 18 people who were killed when the tower collapsed near the pool of Siloam. They weren’t worse sinners than anyone else. They were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

So, seize the day. Today is the day to get right with God. Today is the day to repent. Today is the day to start living in a new way.”

And that is the message for us as well. Today is the day to get right with God. Today is the first day of the rest of your life. Make the most of it! Repent!”

REPENTANCE DEFINED

So, if repentance is the key, what is repentance?

What are being called to do?

What does it mean to repent?

Does it mean to cower in fear? Does it mean to feel sorry? Does it mean that a sense of guilt over past wrongs should dominate our lives? The answer is none of the above!

To repent means to change our priorities and go in a different direction.

When we repent, we have a wonderful moment of clarity. We understand that our lives are fragile, a precious gift from God. And we also understand that our finite lives have a purpose, and that purpose is to give God the glory.

Once again I go back to the first question and answer of the Shorter Catechism. “What is the chief end” of men and women? The chief end of men and women is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.

True joy is not found in filling our lives with endless activities. True joy is living our lives with an awareness of our gracious Creator and giving thanks for all that is good in our lives this day.

Author Frederick Buechner defined repentance in this way, “To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, ‘I’m sorry,’ [and more time looking to the future] and saying, ‘Wow!’”

We don’t say “wow” enough. We have no appreciation of how each moment is such a wonderful gift.

THIS IS THE DAY

None of us are promised tomorrow. Random tragedy and violence strikes the good and the bad alike. If we think that there is a protective bubble around our lives because we are people of faith, we are doomed to disappointment. (Indeed there are some who become very discouraged with or even antagonistic toward God if they believe that and a tragic time of testing comes.)

No, we cannot guarantee our future. But, all of us can choose to make the most of today. All of us can say with the Psalmist, “This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.” Psalm 118:24) When we receive God’s precious gift of life, we also are given the responsibility to do something with that gift.

The great hymn writer Isaac Watts wrote, “There are a number of us who creep into the world to eat and sleep, and, know, not the reason we are born but only to consume the corn, devour the cattle, flesh, and fish, and leave behind an empty dish. If our tombstones when we die were not taught to flatter or lie, there’s nothing better to be said than this: He’s eaten all his bread, drunk up his drink and gone to bed.”

I hope to have a tombstone that can say more than that!

And yet we live in a world that encourages us to be nothing more than consumers, to just leave an empty dish at the end of our days! We have done such a good job of consuming that our actions even threaten the planet on which we all live. It is time for us to wake up to the truth. Time is short and precious, and God in Christ is calling us to go in a different direction.

BEARING FRUIT

Garrison Keillor once said, “You can become a Christian by going to church just about as easily as you can become an automobile by sleeping in a garage.” We need to do more than just answer “present” when the “roll is called up yonder.” We need to make the most of the day we have been given today. We are called to bear fruit.

That’s the point Jesus made in our lesson for today. He told a parable about a fig tree. The fig tree had been planted in a man’s vineyard for three years. And it bore no fruit.

The owner of the vineyard was getting fed up with this worthless, fruitless fig tree. It was ugly. It was barren, and it was just taking up space. So, the owner told his gardener,

“Cut it down.
Why waste good ground with it any more?”

But, the gardener urged him to have patience. He told the owner, “Give the tree a little more time. I’ll dig around it, fertilize it and maybe next year it will bear some fruit. If it doesn’t bear fruit by next year, then you can cut it down.”

This is a parable of grace. Those who need to repent are given the gift of time. Jesus was telling his listeners, “It’s not too late. You still have time. God is giving you a second chance. Take it! Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.”

God has graciously given all of us here today the gift of time. What are we going to do with that gift? And what kind of fruit are we called to produce?

THE FRUIT OF FORGIVENESS

I would suggest that we are called to bear the fruit of forgiveness. Each Sunday when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we say "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." This act of repentance is something that we must work on every day of our lives, and as we get older and approach the end of our life, this fruit becomes more pungent and powerful.

A person on her death bed once said to me,
"I feel so helpless. If only I could do something productive."

And I replied, "Did you know that you are the most powerful person in this whole situation? People will remember everything you say during these next few days.

Is there anyone with whom you need to be reconciled?
Do you need to forgive someone? Do you need to ask someone's forgiveness?

Do it now. It will make a huge difference."

For the first time in a long time a smile came across the woman's face. There were family members that needed her forgiveness. She had her daughter call everyone to her bedside. She now had a purpose for living, and her last days were spent doing a ministry of reconciliation.

She was lucky in a way. She knew that her time soon approached and she was given the opportunity to make things right with others and with God. She was given the gift of time, time to say what she had to say and do what she had to do.

But, many of us will not have that opportunity. The end may come upon us suddenly, and that's why we need to repent now. Beat the rush! Repent now! Reset your priorities now. Speak that word of encouragement and

forgiveness today. Tell that special person how much you love them. Look for opportunities to lighten someone's burden.

WISHING YOUR LIFE AWAY

When I was child I was often dissatisfied with my lot in life. I always wanted to be doing something else. Many of my sentences begin with the phrase, "I wish I could do this or that or the other thing." My exasperated father used to tell me, "Son, you're going to wish your life away."

I've learned to appreciate his words more as times has passed. These days I'm less focused on what I might do or become in the future because the future seems less clear. I have learned not to count on the future. Instead, I feel called to do the best I can this day and let the future take care of itself.

The future is, after all, in God's capable hands.

I have no desire to wish my life away. I want to savor each moment. I want to remember that each day is a gift from God, and I want to be found doing his will when that final trumpet sounds.

The Psalmist wrote,
"Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."
Psalm 90:12 (NIV)

When I read this verse I thought of a lady who used to work with Carrollyn in North Carolina. She was a teacher, but she didn't like her job very much. As a result she was counting the days to retirement.

In fact she even made a chain out of construction paper that represented the years she had until retirement. Every year she would remove one more link in the chain and encourage herself by knowing that she was that much closer to her goal.

But, she was a relatively young person, and it was a very long chain. I thought to myself, "What a waste to spend so much time waiting for a day so far in the future."

This was not what the Psalmist meant when he talked about numbering our days.

He was talking about more than just crossing off the days on the calendar, mindlessly following the daily routine with our only hope being some glorious future retirement. (I suspect that some of you here today can attest to the fact that retirement is not nearly as glorious as you imagined when you were younger.)

The Psalmist wants us to meditate on the fact of our mortality. The Psalmist wants us to think about what many of us try so hard to forget.

We have a limited number of days. How do we want to spend the time that we have left? What is really important to us? What can we do this day to further God's purpose for our life? What would it mean to live today with eternity in our hearts?

I used to think this verse was a bit morbid. Who wants to number their days? Who wants to keep mortality on the front burner?

In fact the diversions of life are often used to prevent us from thinking about it too much. What's that old saying, "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die?" In other words, live an unreflective life. Don't think too much about it, and you'll be happier.

But, I have found that this kind of living only increases our anxiety about the future. We're not able to forget our mortality no matter how much we overindulge in the pleasures of life. The Bible tells us in so many places and in so many ways that it is better to embrace our mortality.

Yes, one day we will die, but it will not be a rendezvous with nothingness. It will be a time to meet our maker, the gracious judge who has revealed himself most clearly in his Son, Jesus.

And so as we face the challenges and disappointments of this present age today, we must ask ourselves, "How should I deal with this situation in the light of all eternity? How important is all this in the grand scheme of things? Is it something that really requires the attention I'm giving it or is it just a

distraction that will keep me from attending to the more important questions of life?”

Don't sleep through your life.

Wake up to the joy and hope that is yours this day in Christ Jesus.

The good news today is this; you still have time. Use it wisely. Repent.

Amen.