

Repent, or Else, March 24, 2019, St. Timothy, Burnaby

Is 55:1-9; Ps 63:1-8; 1 Cor 10:1-13; Lk 13:1-9

Prayer

If you were to compare all of the religions of the world and measure up the pros and the cons of each one—as if you were buying a used car (nobody would ever actually do this—that’s not how we “choose” which religion to follow), you would notice two things about Christianity: It is probably the easiest religion to follow and at the same time, it is also the hardest religion to follow. One of the greatest things about Christianity is that there is not a huge list of rules and regulations that one must follow in order to meet the criteria of being a Christian; anyone can do it; anyone can be a Christian! But, one of the things that makes Christianity so hard to follow is that there is not a huge list of rules and regulations the one must follow in order to meet the criteria of being a Christian. There is a tremendous freedom in being a Christian! And at the same time, there are some lofty expectations. We don’t check for halos before we let you in the door here—we recognize that all of us are still works in progress. That should be a source of some relief and comfort. But at the same time, nobody ever really “makes it”. There is always room for improvement. Jesus’ instructions to his followers was “be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.” It’s easy to get in, but not so easy to rise to the top.

So when we face the reality that none of us is perfect, it is only natural that we start to wonder about what the process *toward* perfection looks like. How do we get to be *closer* to perfect? What steps do we take? How is God involved?

Because we will inevitably make some missteps along the way.

So, is God *angry* with us when we don’t achieve perfection? It seemed to be okay for us to be welcomed into the community as we were when we first joined, but how long do we have until we need to reach perfection? What is God’s expectation?

And is that what Jesus’ parable is about?

Jesus talks about a fig tree planted in the midst of a vineyard. There can be lots of reasons that a fig tree might be planted in a vineyard—there are many possible interpretations of that symbolism that I won’t delve into here, but suffice it to say that the owner is very conscious of the presence of that fig tree and the resources it is using that would otherwise be diverted to the grapevines. The fig tree has already been sucking up the resources of the vineyard for three years—and it has nothing to show for those three years. So now what? The gardener actually has to intervene on behalf of the tree—the owner wants to cut it down.

Is that us? Are we in danger of being cut down? Is Jesus actually speaking to God on our behalf, asking God to cut us some slack?

And are these three *literal* years? Or are those years figurative? Because some of us have been coming for a whole lot longer than three years—and only very few of us are close to perfection (myself most certainly not included).

Is our tree in danger of being cut down? Is God on the verge of punishing us?

We have a difficult relationship with punishment in our society. The driver of the truck that collided with the bus carrying the Humboldt Broncos was sentenced this week to eight years in prison. Was that punishment appropriate? Many lives were taken and many more affected. The judge in that case had a very difficult job to do deciding how to sentence the driver.

But it was very clear that it would be the judge who would determine the kind of punishment and the length of the punishment.

It sometimes seems as though it is God (or the universe) who is meting out punishments in our lives. I'm sure that there were some people who thought that it was some powerful force that caused that bus crash—and not just the man driving the truck. Just like there are people who want to associate blame with other tragic events: an Australian MP blamed immigration policies and Muslim migration for the massacre in Christ Church last week; a Catholic priest was stabbed during a service in Montreal this week—there are sure to be those who think this is retribution for the sins of the church (or of that man in particular); [and Robert Mueller delivered his Russia Probe on Friday leaving some hoping for a path to retribution against the president of the United States].

People have long looked for reasons behind *why* things happen. Jesus had to address some of these concerns himself. He mentioned an event disturbingly close to recent events in our world: Pilate (who we will soon get to know much better and learn more about his reputation for cruelty) had “mingled” the blood of some Galileans with their sacrifices. This meant that their blood was spilled as they were in the midst of offering sacrifices (worshipping God). Rather than focusing on what could have driven Pilate to commit such an atrocity (as we have been doing with the accused killer this last week over the New Zealand slaughter), the people in Jesus’ audience saw this as some kind of divine retribution. These people were being punished for the severity of their sins. And they saw a similar “divine action” in a group of 18 who had perished when a tower fell in the wall of the city of Jerusalem.

And we too can be tempted to look for meaning in our own suffering or the tragedies of our world. Instead of looking for the broken-heart of God at the suffering of humanity, we try to make meaning of the suffering—giving God an active role in these tragedies—causing them, or allowing them to happen.

But Jesus is quite clear about this. This is not the reason these people were killed. Their sin did not bring about their death, nor did it create the circumstances of their death. Jesus does not go quite so far as to say what we might say today: sometimes bad things happen. It is not God’s will that we suffer. Our strife is not a punishment from God for our actions.

And that would be great if that is where Jesus stopped.

But he has more to say.

“I tell you,” he continues, “unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

Wait, what? Does this mean that there *will* be a punishment to follow? That we ought to repent on *fear of death*?

We are, after all, in the season of Lent. This is the time of year where we focus on prayer and fasting—where repentance is appropriate (so appropriate that we have moved the confession and absolution to the beginning of our service for the season). We are called to repent of our sins, all the time, but even more so in this season of Lent.

Will we suddenly be punished? Will we need to fear for our lives if we don't repent immediately?

I don't want to speak on behalf of God. I don't know exactly what that judgement (that we will all face, one day) will look like. I don't pretend to know what the consequences might be for all of us who will be judged—and I can't say *for sure* that some of us won't face some of those consequences even *before* our lives are over.

But I can say this: time is running out. As John the Baptist said in the parallel passage we looked at way back in Advent, the axe is already at the root of the tree. Therefore, we are called to bear fruit worthy of repentance. The time is coming to an end—we are already in sudden-death overtime. We don't know when our lives will come to an end—as we have seen, tragedy can strike at any time. And while that tragedy may not be a direct *consequence* of our actions, our life ending (tragically or otherwise), before we have had the chance to do all we intend, is punishment in itself.

And so, as our days are running short, we turn to repentance, and to bearing the fruit of repentance. We are not called merely to feel guilty for the mistakes of our past. We are called instead to turn from our mistakes and to help others. To seek justice. To live honest and generous lives.

And when it comes to turning from our sin, we run back up against that problem that I started with: there are always more ways that we can be better. We can never arrive at perfection (although we can begin to approach it if we spend our lives working at it). And since we already know that Christianity doesn't have a long list of requirements, those of us who are really striving to repent have our work cut out for us. We can't simply run through a checklist, but through this period of Lent we will need to search our hearts to find those attitudes and behaviours that are distancing us from God.

As we continue striving to be perfect, as our heavenly father is perfect, may we seek guidance on our way, as in the words of the psalmist, seeking eagerly after God, thirsting for God, our flesh fainting for God as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

And let us be assured that our God calls to us (as in our reading from Isaiah), to everyone who thirsts, "come to the waters." Let us listen carefully and live.

Amen.