

# Repent and Live

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Isaiah 55 and Luke 13

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Remember when we had visions of a world beyond war. Remember when we believed those we respected, those who led our country or inspired through their sport were beyond us, beyond sin, beyond flaw. Victories in war were over unquestioned evil and complete in their triumph. Heroes were heroes. God unquestioningly rewarded those who believed.

I went to college in the 80s. At that time the thoughts that attracted my attention were the Beyond War movement, a belief that someday our world could be free of conflict if we would just mature enough. I think, today, this is translated as we need to move further along in our evolution. I also was formed by the thoughts of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. Nonviolence seemed a type of miracle work which allowed God to move freely in the hearts of the enemy. A fire was burning in my heart. I was ready to do my part, for the world could be made right in my generation, by my generation. If only people could learn to love one another... war would be no more. Love one another like I love everyone... just don't disagree with me.

Now I still have a place in my heart for that twenty year old young woman, a fire storm of compassion. I am not here to talk anyone out of the fire God places in their hearts. I still believe in miracles. The work you are inspired to do... go on, do it! Give up what you call your life for a year or two or three and live the gospel life. You will find your heroes, you will experience victories, you will overcome evil, and you will know joy.

Even we who are not in our twenties anymore can find ourselves in a place to throw our whole selves in. Maybe it isn't as easy to do when we have established our lives. But I wonder if we do not bring more power to our cause the harder it is for us to pull away.

Ahhh, let's not get down too far this path for such is the work of prayer 101 which the Men are invited to experience at the end of April. It is also knotted up in our vocation...our "vocatio," our life's work. It takes time, prayer, silence, and heart to heart sharing to find God's way with us. If there are enough of you willing to do such work, we might be able to talk Laura into a leading a Vocatio workshop again someday.

Whether we discern in prayer that we are called by God to pack our bags or we are called to enter into a new adventure where we are or we are called to stand firm

in what we are already doing, Jesus has a teaching for us today. Sure, the teaching could be taken as a warning to be ready in the last days when Jesus returns—repent, be ready for if you don't you will perish just as they did. But it seems to me that the perishing can happen long before Jesus' return. For the fire that sparks us to live into the gospel life can be snuffed out when we realize our love isn't as deep as we thought, our reach not as wide, and the world not as responsive to God's hand as we once believed.

I hear the drama of the scripture unfolding this way. Before the scripture you heard read, Jesus asks...

"Why not judge for yourselves what is right?" Make an effort to settle disputes on your own. Do not bring them before a magistrate who doesn't know you, who will throw you into prison, who will make you pay every last penny. No, meet with the person yourself and see what can happen.

In response to this teaching one of the gathered people calls out something like...

Oh, yes--as if we have the power to effect change. Look at what Pilate has done. He has killed Galileans and mingled their blood with the blood of his sacrifices. Shall we go to him and ask, "please don't do this anymore." Where is our God? When do we get our day? When does what we do really matter? Looking at it from here, it seems to me that God has forgotten about us.

I better be honest here. Jesus doesn't answer those questions. They are my own. After all, I'm part of the crowd and so get a voice. And, while it isn't the set of questions for which Luke seeks answer, I think the question he has Jesus answer sheds light on my own.

Jesus poses and answers the question..."Are they [the ones who were killed] any worse sinners than all other Galileans?" "No," he says. So we don't get to blame the people for the tragedy or do we? For "no" is followed by ... "Unless you all repent you will perish as they did." That is a twist, isn't it?! I would have expected a simple "no," a defense of God, something along the lines of "it is a fallen world" or even the one we find in our Isaiah scripture, "God's ways are not our ways." Instead of either response, Jesus turns it on us, as if we are all to blame.

You will perish unless you repent. The answer to one in

the crowd like me..."You will perish if you blame God for the troubles of the world." Why? Not because God is vindictive but because you will never do what it takes to really live.

You will perish unless you repent. The world will be further marred by you if you don't change.

That is often furthest from our mind when we are in self-righteous mode.

Look at what Pilate has done, Jesus! Jesus responds: Look at what happened when the tower of Siloam fell, killed 18 people.

Apparently bad people and bad construction are forever part of our world.

"Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Repentance is a distinctly Christian word. It is a translation of the Greek word *Metaneo* and is linked both to a change of mind and contrition. We change our mind because we are sorry. What makes the word religious is that the contrite change of mind is in relationship with God. This is less about saying, "I'm sorry I hurt you" and much more about saying to God, "I'm sorry I hurt one You love." The goal of repentance isn't to make people like us or to simply get along or to generate good news about us and others. The goal of repentance is to live more closely with God.

The word, repentance, helps to remind us of who it is we have offended and who we are ultimately trying to please, whose opinion will give shape to our work. It tells of the relationship we are in with God. It is a word from mouth of Jesus.

In the two pictures scripture gives us we can see examples of what it looks like when we choose to live an unrepentant life. In the first, we see the crowd pointing their fingers at Pilate, blaming him for those who had died. In the second, Jesus tells about a structure that topples over and kills those standing under it. What is striking is how both images are ones of powerlessness. Ironic, isn't it? Choosing not to see where we have turned from God weakens us.

Indeed, pointing the finger at others carves into our brains a negative pathway that is difficult to overcome. I was looking through papers one day and landed across something I had written down: "those who complain most are often the least happy with themselves." There are professional complainers out there. But, I must admit, I couldn't shake it off as just their problem.

Probably we've all experienced, at one time or another,

being consumed by anger/frustration with someone. I remember, that girl who loved everyone in college, got very annoyed with a boy who was part of the group interviewing to be a Resident Assistant for the dorms. He was arrogant and he had a speech tick that drove me crazy. I think he used the word "like" every other sentence. And, he always had to say something. It was always dumb. I became so obsessed with him that I became less than my best self and was not chosen for the position.

But Pilate is a political figure acting on a much larger stage. He is causing trouble for more than just one person. He doesn't flinch from killing. He rather keep his power than keep some people alive. Surely we should be outraged at such people. Surely we must rise up against them. Tyrants must be stopped.

Here we stand in one of the great tensions of our scripture. Why doesn't Jesus reveal here that God wants a more just peace? Why doesn't Jesus fight?

Perhaps it is that we who must act in the world against tyrants need to be sure that the battle doesn't define us. Maybe scripture is a reminder that the world stage is so complicated, intertwined with that which we will never fully understand, that it cannot be our first love. "Repent or perish." Jesus turns us from shouting out at Pilate back into relationship with God.

The second image scripture provides of an unrepentant life is of a tower, falling, crushing people. Such an image has great resonance with us in view of the recent earthquakes. Yet, again, Jesus seems to move us out of the more general discussion, this time one about natural disasters and whether or not they are of God's hand, to consider once again that it will be like this for us unless we repent. If God isn't first, if we aren't answering first to God's love, our lives will feel as if bricks are continually falling upon our heads.

Dump your false gods before they dump you...or send bricks down upon your head. From last week's sermon:

"The idol of success leads to fear, to exhaustion, to suspicion, to bondage...."

OUCH! There's more...

"God wants our life to be simplified and we make it hard; God wants us to love others and we see them as rivals; God wants us to know we are each one a dearly beloved "somebody" and we see ourselves as "nobody."

How heavy are these bricks!

God wants us to know God's love and we want to argue whether or not God desired an earthquake to kill hundreds of people. "Like, like, like...I'm hearing that annoying boy in the R.A. interview again.

I imagine Jesus drew in a big breath before he told the parable of the fig tree. Most of you know that the one thing you don't want to be in the gospels is a fig tree that isn't bearing fruit. Jesus is forever cursing such trees or talking about them needing to be chopped down as he does here.

The man of the parable is ready to cut the tree down until the gardener speaks up... "Sir, let the tree alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure in it."

Don't you want to ask, why wasn't that done before?! You're the gardener for heaven's sake. Didn't you notice that your own tree needed some care?

If the fig tree bearing fruit is the sign of our faith giving to the world that which matters, then shouldn't we do the gardening that allows our faith to blossom?

Repent ... if you have nothing to confess that keeps you from God you haven't dug deeply enough. Go ahead, dig deeper, so that there's plenty of room for you to toss the manure you've allowed in your life.

Repent or perish....repent and live.

And when you do the work of repentance, keep your ears open, for when we turn back to God the world celebrates.

For you shall go out in joy,

And be led back in peace,

The mountains and the hills

Before you

Shall burst into song,

And all the trees of the field shall

Clap their hands.