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**March 7, 2010
Luke 13:1-9**

REPENT OR PERISH

The common conversation that occurs between preachers when they are “talking shop” often begins with this question: are you a lectionary preacher? What this is asking is do you preach on the collection of scripture readings that have been organized around the church year and the seasons of that year (like Lent, Easter, Advent and Christmas). This collection is an ecumenical affair given to us from the North American Consultation on Common Texts (CCT) and the International English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC). How’s that for too much bureaucracy?

Well, Robin and I are both lectionary preachers but we are fast becoming lectionary preachers with a small “L”. The reason for this is that the lectionary has an agenda. It chooses certain stories and leaves others out. It edits stories to slant them a particular direction and it favors a certain theological underpinning. So, if this is the case, why do I still preach the lectionary? Well, because I have an agenda too. I do a lot of the same editing and selective reading and if left to my own devices I tend to drift to particular stories and portions of the Bible that favor my own theology.

So lectionary preaching is, for me, a discipline. It forces me to look at parts of the Bible I would not choose and it forces me to look at the prepared choices with a critical eye. That’s where the small “L” comes in. Sometimes I will preach on a certain passage and let you know what I think is wrong with the selection. Guess what? Today is such a day.

We don't know the full context of this exchange between Jesus and the crowd. We don't know what the motives of the people who told Jesus about this account of Galilean blood being dishonored by Pilate were. All we know is that this passage asks the unanswerable question: why do bad things happen to good people? Now who would preach on that by choice? It is the most often asked question from a pastoral and theological perspective and the one for which pastors have the least satisfying answers.

But it has been a pivotal question for a long time, even in this passage where it isn't really overtly stated but hovers over the whole passage like a vulture. "Do you think that the Galileans were worse sinners than any others?" Jesus asks. His answer is pretty clear. No. Even though the equation that heaps bad events upon bad people is tempting, Jesus avoids that temptation. He does not preach a God of providence who punishes the wicked and rewards the deserving. All he tells people is that they must repent.

These two passages come at the end of a long string of parables and stories Jesus is telling a crowd...they begin all the way back in chapter 12...a point which is hidden by the lectionary edit. This is, in fact, more than just a crowd. The text says that they have gathered "by the thousands, so that they trampled on one another". This is a full-fledged horde. And the passage you just heard comes at the very end of this "sermon" that Jesus is delivering to the masses.

That's an important thing to know because Jesus closes, like all good sermons do, with a kicker. He challenges them, he tells them that things won't be easy and then he saves the best for last – a complete remodel of all their preconceived, deeply held, rock-solid notions of how God works. The wide-spread belief then, as now, was that God was a God of providence. God rewarded those who did good and punished those who did badly. It's the basis of the prosperity gospel that is so prevalent now, but it is also what I often hear people express in times of crisis, maybe because that equation is oddly comforting, as long as you aren't part of it.

I, for one, don't believe in providence – that everything happens for a reason and God is busy pulling the strings of the universe, orchestrating the perfect creation. There are still times when I am tempted to go there, but when that hypothesis gets played out I never like where I end up. So, I can't hold that position. It is just untenable to me. But I do believe in a God who is active in history, though maybe not in specific deeds and actions. Instead of retribution or divine intervention, I believe in redemption...and that even in the midst of great suffering and evil there is a large arc, that, as Dr. King once said, bends towards justice and love...it reaches for wholeness.

See I think that fear is the real issue here. What lies beneath the question of bad things happening is how do I keep bad things from happening? This is the same impetus that drives us to deny long-held and fundamental civil rights, to engage in wholesale torture (no matter what glossy label you refer to it with) and to lose all sight of the common good in pursuit of single-issue campaigns which do nothing but divide and conquer.

What Jesus compels the crowd to is to an understanding that bad things will happen - often far beyond your control. What we are not to do is live by that fear. We can't stop it. If someone wants to strap a bomb to their chest and walk into a mall and detonate it – if their heart is that black and rotten – then the truth is that we cannot guarantee our avoidance of such evil. We can and should be deliberate about making smart choices, but this does not assure our safety.

The word that Jesus uses for his "kicker" in this sermon is "repent", which in Greek is *metanueo*. It is always translated repent because of what that used to mean in Old English.

What it literally means is this – turn around. It means to change your mind. That's it. Repent means to change your mind. And "perish" is a word rich in meaning – destruction or death is one thing it means but in Hebrew the word means spoilage. And in Aramaic, the language that Jesus most likely spoke, the word means "to be lost". So, if we look beyond the somewhat wooden translations, we can see this as "change your mind or be lost". A far different connotation than what we usually think of “repent or perish” reflecting, yes?

Jesus follows up his sermon with a parable, as he often does. The typical reading of this parable has God as the landowner and Jesus as the gardener, advocating on our behalf – we non-fruit bearing trees. But I think that the gardener is God and the landowner is history – it is God who is holding out for one more year...one more year to bear fruit.

Jesus has just told this large crowd that they must change their minds about God and their relationship to God or they will be lost. He starts by challenging the common conceptions of God. The God of retribution is the primary model for these folks. But before we look down our noses at the primitive theological ideas of the first century, we'd better look closer because I think that model is still with us. We like to think of God as a God of love, but we act like we're pretty sure that God operates like *we* do.

And this is what Jesus is confronting in both his crowd and us today. You'd better change your mind, he warns, because the road you're on leads to nowhere. You will soon find yourself lost if you don't stop being so devoutly religious that you lose sight of God. It isn't enough just to act pious. It isn't enough just to show up to church on Sunday, even if you are the most regular attendee - with your own pew and everything. The life of faith, Jesus will have us know, produces fruit or it is lost. And God wants fruit, but not just any old fruit. God wants fruit of justice and kindness and humility.

We're not living in neutral times, my friends. We are living in times that need the fruit of spiritual lives. We are living in times that need hearts that are purified by love, dedicated to forgiveness and open to humility. We need people who are willing to look beyond their own needs and wants and see that we are all connected. What we do in our lives affects not only the people around us and throughout the world, but also generations down the line.

We are awash in divisive speech, fearful decision-making and bitter individualism. It is time for us to repent – to change our minds about how we will live in the world, how we will interact with one another and what we are willing to stand for and against. This world needs people who believe in hope and change even when they seem absent. This world needs people who choose not to be made apathetic by fear but instead walk in love, even though they know that walking in love means we will be hurt. Bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people, but we are not bound by that fateful flow of life.

It is here in this community that we will change our minds. Here in this place we will turn around and choose a new path. For here we meet at this table to celebrate our togetherness – shifting our seats to make room for anyone who comes to God's table and gathering to share

together the good news. Here we are lifted by the God of Easter morning, the God who showed us love in the resurrection of Christ Jesus, the God who redeems and leads to life, even in the darkest night.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN



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