

# The Third Sunday in Lent

Luke 13:1-13

March 24, 2019

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

## Repentance Is the Pathway to Salvation

Sudden and unexplained death has

always been and will always be part

of the human experience. How's

that for a sermon opening? I hate to

be the bearer of bad tidings but all

you need to do is pay attention to

the news cycle over the past couple



of weeks. We have seen mass shootings and airplane crashes and all the other bits of

random violence that have probably always been part of our existence but are now easily

shared. Thanks to the fresh evil of social media these horrific events are even yours to

view live while they are happening. So sometimes lives are snuffed out in an instant and

we are left horrified at the randomness of it all, and perhaps thinking more carefully

about our own length of time on this earth.

In our Gospel reading today from St. Luke we start with just such a report of a terrible

tragedy. Some people come to our Lord as He is teaching the crowds with a description

of the slaughter of a number of Galileans at the order of Pontus Pilate, who of course

was the Roman procurator or governor of Judea. They told Jesus that the blood of these

poor victims “had mingled with their sacrifices” (Lk 13:1). That’s really all we know for

sure. The whys whens and hows of this particular incident have been lost to history. But we can surmise that this occurred during the Passover, for this was the only time when laypeople would sacrifice at the temple. At that time the people would have brought their Passover lambs in preparation for the seder. So Pilate violated the sanity of the temple in this most heinous crime, sending troops there for apparently no other reason than bloodshed.

Why are the people bringing this news to Jesus? Because they want Him to explain it all. They want Him to say something to make them feel better. For instance, Jesus could tell them how this slaughter at the temple was part of the diabolical plans of the Roman empire, and that the solution to stopping further outrage is to mount an all out rebellion against the occupying power. Surely the people desired that Jesus would tell them this because they wanted Jesus to be that person, the Kingly Messiah in the line of David who would cast out the political order of the day and renew the united monarchy.

If not a political solution then perhaps Jesus would give them a theological answer. We can explain these kinds of events in terms of bad people getting what they deserve, right? The people who are the victims of these random acts of violence, even plane crashes and shootings, must have done something really bad. Wouldn't that be a nice way to think about it? Surely the Pharisees liked to teach about a cause and effect relationship between sin and suffering. Today we've imported the idea of karma from the eastern religions into our collective way of thinking. All the bad things you do are somehow comically stored up against you and then —POW. Karma. Well, you had it coming.

But these Galileans killed on the orders of Pilate were no more sinful than other Galileans. Their tragedy cannot be connected to specific or exceptional sins. Phew! That's good news, right? Well, not really. For in knocking aside a knee jerk explanation for the report of the Galileans massacre, Jesus introduces a much larger idea of judgement, something that impacts everyone. For the tragedies and circumstances that beset the entire world might not be a cosmic *quid pro quo* against sinful individuals, but they are surely still a sign of God's wrath against sinful humankind. So Jesus says, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? <sup>3</sup> No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Lk 13:2–3). He even gives them another example, "eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them" (Lk 13:4). And again He teaches the same message. That message is repentance.

For the signs of the times are showing us that you and me — everyone — we are on our way to appear before the judge. We do not know when. But we are born onto this path that will ultimately lead to judgement. There is, however, hope. Because present on this journey along with us is Jesus, proclaiming a ministry of the Kingdom of God. This ministry is announced in the very first Words Jesus speaks in the Gospel according to St. Mark: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1:15).

So we need to know what this repentance thing is since Jesus talks about it so much. The ancient Greeks had an idea of repentance that involved changing your mind. I used to think about something is one way, but I changed my mind and now I think of it a

different way. But the repentance Jesus has in mind takes this and amplifies it in the context of God's Word that comes to us in Law and Gospel. So in the part of St. Mark's Gospel I just mentioned, and in other parts of the New Testament, repentance means means nothing else than to recognize sin truly, to be heartily sorrowful for it, and to abstain from it. This is what Lutherans call contrition. This contrition is the work of the Holy Spirit that is accomplished through the Law of God.

But contrition, that is the recognition of our sins and sorrow over them, is not enough. Faith in Christ must be joined to contrition. So the repentance that Jesus preaches has another part. This is trust in the One who brings forgiveness and release. This is the faith that comes by hearing the Word and receiving the Sacraments. These are the means of grace that point us to Jesus, but even more than that, they are the means by which we receive the benefits of the atoning sacrifice of Christ upon the cross. For His death is our justification. Jesus will perish on a hill outside Jerusalem in order to rescue humanity from perishing. "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace" (Eph 1:7).

So in a sense repentance also means the entire conversion of a person who is now turned away from sin and only by the power of the Holy Spirit is able to hear and accept the saving Gospel. Therefore when Jesus tells the people "but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Lk 13:3) this is what He wants the people to know. Repentance is the pathway to salvation, and without the salvation that Jesus brings there is only judgement. Without repentance there is only destruction.

What repentance is *not* is a list of things you must do to get back in God's good graces, what some churches call satisfaction. Jesus calls us to repentance that is a response in faith to the Word, faith that is worked by the Holy Spirit. Our repentance then is simply a return to our Baptism, for in those waters you received the promise of forgiveness of sins and eternal life, which you return to again and again. There's more as well. Repentance also brings about change and renewal, the fruit of the Holy Spirit. The Augsburg Confession says "Then improvement should also follow, and a person should refrain from sins. For these should be the fruits of repentance, as John says in Matthew 3: 'Bear fruit worthy of repentance.'"<sup>1</sup>

This call comes from a Lord who "is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Pe 3:9). So the little parable we hear from Jesus about the fig tree not bearing any fruit shows us the Father's patience and love for people. God will be patient — for a little while longer — waiting for the fruit of repentance. The vinedresser in the parable begs for the owner of the vineyard not to chop down the tree, lest there is still a chance it will bear fruit. One more year of cultivation, that's all he's asking. "Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down" (Lk 13:9).

The vinedresser who works in the vineyard must act to save the tree. But the tree must respond to the acts of the vinedresser. The tree must bear fruit or be cast into the fire. The vinedresser is at work wherever the Gospel is rightly preached and the Sacraments are administered according to the institution of our Lord. So the Gospel is preached into a world that awaits judgment. Only the Gospel has the power to bring forth such fruits;

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<sup>1</sup> AC XII  
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for it is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Ro 1:16). Here there is comfort and hope when God appears hidden in the world beset with sin and random death. We must now only look at accidents and massacres in the context of the cross of Christ. Luther said “the gospel and Christ are established and given not to terrify or to condemn, but rather to comfort and console those who have felt its terror and are fainthearted.”<sup>2</sup> So we look to repentance, turning again and again back to healing words which are ours through this comforting and consoling. The forgiveness of sins and eternal life are present in the One who has endured all for our sake, and those things, the very Kingdom of God, are still present and still ours this day: though the preaching of the Word, through the waters of Holy Baptism, and through His very Body and Blood, given and shed for you. Amen.

And now the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠ Soli Deo Gloria

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in SD V.13