



REPENTANCE AND THE PATIENCE OF GOD

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Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

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What our two scripture readings have in common today is a sense of urgency. Each passage wants us to see, to feel, what Martin Luther King, Jr. called “the fierce urgency of now.” King, of course, was speaking of the urgent need for civil rights equality when he said, “We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action.”

King sounded very much like the prophet Isaiah, who spoke God’s urgent invitation to the people of Israel. A moment of decision was upon them. Their long exile in Babylon was coming to an end. Would they decide to stay in Babylon, comfortable or at least complacent, continuing to live under the rule of that empire now so familiar to them? Or, would they choose to return to the Lord as they returned to their homeland, to live under God’s reign instead of Nebuchadnezzar’s? In Babylon, life was predictable if not overly satisfying. Their hours and efforts went toward earning enough money for bread and water and taxes. Maybe a few luxury items like milk, wine, or steak if the stock market was up. It was not particularly interesting, but you could count on it. But with God, who desires a covenantal relationship rather than subjugation, there is the unquantifiable dynamic of daily engagement. God is generous with milk and honey, forgiveness and mercy, but God also expects systemic justice and compassion borne out in daily acts. One reign is far more interesting and ultimately satisfying than the other, but we have to decide which we will live by. As King put it, tomorrow is today, and God’s invitation awaits.



The parable in Luke, which is unique to this Gospel (as are the two disaster stories that precede it), carries the same sense of urgency. The owner of a vineyard has grown tired of waiting for a fig tree to bear fruit. “Cut it down!” he tells the gardener. Time is up. There is, as King said, “such a thing as being too late.”

Luke’s two disaster stories add an exclamation mark to the parable. They show just how unpredictable and fragile life is, so there is no time to waste. Eighteen people die when a tower suddenly falls on them. Whether they were construction workers or unfortunate passersby we do not know, but it hardly matters; their lives are snuffed out in an instant just the same. The other story is one of terrible prescience for our own time: people are worshipping in a sanctuary and are violently murdered, their blood pooling across the floors and spattered against the walls of that sacred space because of hate so strong it has become systemic. The hatred executed in Squirrel Hill and Christchurch, whether by lone terrorists or the result of a loosely organized movement, requires vigorous and positive action from the rest of us.

Yet it is precisely the sense of urgency in these texts that poses a challenge to us. It is hard to sustain the “fierce urgency of now.” If death is not loudly knocking at my door, I am not reckoning daily with the fact that “I am dust and to dust I shall return.” In fact, I find a reminder of that once a year quite enough, thank you, and prefer it in a form easily washed off before I get on with the rest of my day or go out to dinner. And when every single news item and political pronouncement seems incessantly urgent and fierce, ironically *nothing* seems urgent or fierce. Despite King’s, or the Gospel’s, requirement for “vigorous and positive action *now*,” for sanity’s sake we fall into apathy and complacency and seek distractions instead.

All of this reminded me of an article I filed away this time last year. In an issue of *The Atlantic*, the article is both interesting and unsettling. Bianca Bosker reflects on an app she downloaded into her phone as an experiment. She writes, “Five times a day for the past three months, an app called WeCroak has been telling me I’m going to die. It does not mince words. It surprises me at unpredictable intervals, always with the same blunt message, “Don’t forget, you’re going to



die.” This is the app’s sole function—to send messages “at random times and at any moment just like death.” The reminder comes with a quote meant to encourage “contemplation, conscious breathing or meditation.” Or, in my case, more likely shortness of breath and elevated blood pressure.

Bosker got interested in this as a pursuit of ways to transform her iPhone from a stressful distraction into a source of clarity and peace. Research shows that Americans check their phone an average of 76 times a day for a cumulative two and a half hours a day. We try to cut back, but our willpower fades. As it turns out, ‘there’s an app for that.’ In fact, there are over 1,000 mindfulness apps designed to help us disconnect. But, of course, they just encourage us to check our phones more. WeCroak does not encourage engagement. It is based on a “famous Bhutanese folk saying that advises “to be a truly happy person, one must contemplate death five times daily.” Bosker installed it to see if it was a joke, but has come to appreciate it instead. Once, before she was going to speak to an audience of strangers, she was trembling with nerves. She got a ping: ‘Don’t forget, you’re going to die.’ “What’s a little public speaking next to the terrifying finality of my inevitable demise?” she thought. At a friend’s wedding, she was distracted, worrying about a deadline at work. Ping... “I loosened up,” she said, “finished my champagne, and opted to enjoy myself.” As she scrolls through Instagram and Twitter and the reminder of her death breaks in, it helps her distance herself from her phone, a reminder that these other apps not only consume her attention, but are consuming chunks of her life. A Lenten app if ever there was one.

The Heading above Luke 13:1-9 in my study Bible reads: *Repent or Perish*. I suppose it is no wonder, then, that people brought to Jesus’ attention the terrible incident of Pilate ordering the murders of Galilean worshipers. They asked Jesus, “Did this happen to them because they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” It is an ancient question, maybe one of the oldest and we still ask it today. “Why them?,” we wonder following some disaster, accidental or intentional. “Why me or my loved one?,” we wonder when tragedy makes a home visit. It is not simply doubt that asks such a question. Faith asks it, too, as we wrestle with



God, our faith mixing with grief over such a deep matter as this. Did I do something to deserve this? Is this God's punishment?

The question lurks. Jesus quickly dismisses it with a firm "No." Then Jesus himself recalls another example, the tower of Siloam tumbling on top of 18 innocent souls. Jesus says they were no worse than anyone else and didn't deserve it either. There are as many more examples to offer as there are people walking under scaffolding today, boarding a plane, kneeling to pray in a synagogue or masjid or church, sitting in a chemo lab or lying on a bed in the ICU.

The question haunts us to some degree because it has been proclaimed in many pulpits by preachers who connect our repenting and our perishing. One of the most famous sermons in American history is the sermon Jonathan Edwards preached in 1741. The Great Awakening of religious fervor was spreading throughout New England. Edwards preached a sermon in Enfield, Connecticut entitled, "Sinners in the Hands of Angry God." One of the texts he cited was a line from this parable, Luke 13:7, of that fig tree that bore no fruit: "Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" Edwards describes the great danger we are in: "'Tis a great Furnace of Wrath, a wide and bottomless Pit, full of the Fire of Wrath, that you are held over in the Hand of God," he thundered, "God, whose Wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you as against many of the Damned in Hell: You hang by a slender Thread, with the Flames of divine Wrath flashing about it, and ready to singe it and burn it asunder...the Ax is in an extraordinary Manner laid at the Root of the Trees..." We used to preach like that...some still do.

Barbara Brown Taylor is a modern-day preacher who does not offer an easy answer to the question of our repenting and our perishing, but does offer an exegesis and a theology about suffering that invites something other than fear. Taylor says, "Christianity is the only religion that confesses a God who suffers. It is not all that popular an idea," she notes, "even among Christians. We prefer a God who prevents suffering, only that is not the God we have got. What the cross teaches us is that God's power is not the power to force human choices and end



human pain. It is, instead, the power to pick up the shattered pieces and make something holy out of them—not from a distance but right close up.”ⁱ

In the end, this is what these texts give us, the God who comes close. Who has the power to pick up shattered pieces and make something holy out of them. God comes to Israel in long exile grown so used to the exacting price of empire they hardly remember any other way of life. “Come to the waters,” God says. “Come, buy and eat! Even if you have no money—come, buy wine and milk and meat because I am giving them away for free!” And to the impatient owner of the vineyard, concerned only with making a profit off his figs and grapes, the gardener steps in... “Oh, let’s give it some more time... a year at least. Let me dig around it and loosen the soil and add some manure...let’s see what it might do, eh?”

When Doug and I were at the Moveable Feast in January, one of our beloved members wrote a paper on this Lukan text. This text that acknowledges that life can be precarious and unfair, even cruel, but tells us that we are offered again and again an opportunity for repentance—the chance to turn around and see who God is again; to see what God is making possible anew; to affirm how even a life cut short or cut down in cruelty still has meaning. In his paper on this text, our friend revealed his recent diagnosis of Parkinson’s disease. So this time around the lectionary gave him a different way of seeing, feeling this text. There was an urgency about it this year. He wrote that he did not see Jesus’ invitation to “Repent” as a shaming opportunity or a warning of punishment. Instead, he sees it as a call to turn around now and look “at the present with humble eyes,” and revisit the past “with watchful remembrance.” “Repent,” he writes, “is a call to turn around and notice what has been, what is now, and what shall ever be, to give account for who I am and what I have done with what God has given me.” He trusts that his ‘repenting’ does not result in judgment, but is an invitation to an even deeper relationship with God in this life and in the life to come.

When Melanie and I bought our little house in North Carolina, it was in terrible shape and so was the landscape around it. It had been rented out for years to college students and youth groups, and it was rough. The front yard, unkempt and

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



overgrown, had three old and worn-out dogwood trees. Tangled with grapevines, with plenty of dead branches, and bark as wrinkled as any ancient skin I've ever seen, I remarked as soon as the ink was dry on the mortgage that the three scrawny dogwoods should be cut down.

"Oh," Melanie said, "no, not yet." "We can get new ones," I insisted. "Maybe with pink blossoms instead of white." "It will take years for new ones to have such shapes as these...these are old, natural...not like the new ones grown in nurseries. Let me loosen the soil around them and add some fertilizer. Let's get the grapevine out and cut away some of the dead branches. Who knows? Maybe they will make it a few more years." We have watched over them ever since, rooting for them to make it one more year, with their little leaves and scant clusters of berries and blossoms.

I haven't forgotten, of course, that they are going to die. They will, and so will I, and who knows which of us will go first? But for now, there is time to bloom and bear fruit. There is time to turn around and notice what has been, what is now, and what shall ever be. Tomorrow is not yet today. And I know that in life and history there is such a thing as being "too late." But this day, whether I am sitting on that front porch by the dogwoods or standing here at the corner of Park and 92nd Street, I am offered the opportunity to turn around and see what God is doing; to give account for who I am and what I have done with what God has given me. On a good day with good theology, the urgency I feel about that is not rooted in the fear of judgment, but becomes a glad acceptance of God's urgent, patient and gracious invitation.

Amen.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, **God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering** (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 118.