

Sermon Preached on March 20, 2022 – Third Sunday in Lent

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St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Yarmouth, ME 04096

Exodus 3:1-15

Psalms 63:1-8

I Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

Called to Repentance

Oh Lord, my God
When I, in awesome wonder
Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder
Thy power throughout the universe displayed

Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee
How great Thou art, how great Thou art
Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee
How great Thou art, how great Thou art

If there is a theme that runs through this morning's readings, it is Paul's words: "God is faithful"

God is indeed faithful

From Exodus we hear how the great "I AM" has heard the cry of their people and has come to deliver them with the help of the unassuming prophet, Moses

God is faithful!

In 1 Corinthians, we hear how those very people who were liberated from their perils got cranky in the wilderness and misbehaved, and God loved them through it

God is faithful!

And in Luke we hear the people come to Jesus and ask if God causes great tragedies on account of the great sins of the victims, to which Jesus gives a resounding "No, I tell you"

But then we get this comment: "but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did"

And then he tells a parable about a fig tree that isn't producing fruit – the owner of the garden tells the gardener to cut down this tree, it's not producing. But, the gardener protests – "let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down"

God is fai....wait, what's going on here? Is this a happy ending? There's definitely some hope here, right, because the tree is spared? But, there's also still the chance that the tree might not produce fruit and might be cut down next year.

We're getting into murky territory here

As with all parables, the imagery of a fruitless fig tree must represent something, right? What is it referring to?

Scholars remind us that in Luke's gospel "fruit" is the product of "repentance" – recall John the Baptist who, earlier in Luke's gospel, preached "Bear fruits worthy of repentance...Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Luke 3:8a, 9)

Jesus is, in a way, re-imagining John's image emphasizing the importance of repentance

Yes, we celebrate and can take a deep breath knowing that God does not cause bad things to happen to good or bad people, AND Jesus is trying to point to the larger issue which is our collective need for repentance

Our collective and individual calling to bear fruit and not simply lay idle in the vineyard drinking the ground water and soaking up the nutrients without offering something in return – without repentance

Repentance seems like an odd fruit, an odd offering

In response to God's faithfulness and blessings, God wants us to sit in misery and recount all our sins? That's what repentance is, right? That's what God wants from us? Isn't that why Lent is so dismal?

Of course not, my friends.

That image of repentance is more reflective of our society's penal system than it is God's penitential system...see what I did there?

Penal systems are designed to prescribe punishment to offenders under the legal system

God's penitential system is about grace, love, and mercy

The penal system declares "they deserved it"

The penitential system asks "how do we love you through it?"

The penal system claims there's bad people out there

The penitential system knows we all need healing

The penal system orders "cut off it's limb until it bears fruit"

The penitential system wonders "what if I make sure it has all the resources it needs to thrive, will it then have a chance to bear fruit"

To wrap my head around the beauty of repentance, I first needed to remember that the one with whom I am in relationship and engage this journey of repentance is not the one like Pilate who brutally massacres the people he is ultimately responsible for

Our God is so radically different than that: Our God is the great I AM, radically loving, radically forgiving, radically merciful, radically madly and deeply in love with you that even at your worst God would never tear you down or cause you harm – Jesus said that

Repentance in relationship to that God – not only do I think I could do it, I think I want to do it, I think I need it

Throw me into the arms of the one whose love will enfold me even when I am raging at the world

Lay me at the feet of the one whose grace believes in me even when I am being just horrible

Then sings my soul, my Savior, God, to thee
How great thou art, how great thou art
Then sings my soul, my Savior, God to thee
How great thou art, how great thou art

I also needed to realize that repentance isn't self-flagellation – again, that's way more our society's penal system than it is God's penitential system

Google defines repentance as "the action of repenting; sincere regret or remorse."

Looking to the original Greek, we see that the word "repentance" here in Luke is the Greek word metanoia which means "a change of mind" (meta "change", noein "to have mental perception")

New Testament scholar, Matt Skinner, writes that "To repent is to encounter life, God, and your purpose in a new way, in a truer way. It's to be jolted into discovering a different reality. That's not about trying to satisfy an impossibly demanding Deity" or legal system, I might add. "It's because we're trying to discover peace and joy when those things are proving hard to find."

We live so much in a world that looks for "a punishment that fits the crime" as a way to deter bad behavior and create safer communities and I think this is why we associate repentance as, basically, another form of punishment

No wonder the tree struggles to bear fruit

But, truly, repentance, as Jesus talks about it, couldn't be further from that image

God's penitential system claims repentance as a process that says "let's go through this brokenness together because we know there is life on the other side – life that is a total change of perspective and awareness because we have been honest about where we are"

That is a process that can bear fruit!

That is a process that can nourish the heart, individually and collectively

That is a love and a grace that can make my heart sing

How great thou art, how great thou art.

Maybe, then, we can be bold to repent – both the little things and the big things – because we can trust that God is with us through it all and will see us through to the other side

Honestly, our world needs the fruits of our repentance of the sins of misogyny, of racism, of ableism, of queer- and trans-phobia, of hunger, of violence; of nit-picky arguments with spouses, of judging our neighbors – collectively, and as Jesus reminds us this morning, individually

God needs us to repent, to face the hardest things of our life so that we might have a change of mind, that we might – at the other side of the hard journey – experience the new life of resurrection

Imagine what fruit, imagine what grace upon grace is possible with that kind of repentance, with that kind of love, with that kind of God

Then sings my soul, my Savior, God, to thee
How great thou art, how great thou art
Then sings my soul, my Savior, God, to thee
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Amen.