

SLD03.11.07 Third Lent
EPC
Luke 13:1- 9
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“A Holy Impatience”

So, what if we don't have forever to get the gospel. What if God actually expects us to pay attention to what we see and hear and learn and experience about Jesus, and get a move on. Get on with behaving like we understand why Jesus came, and why he died, and why God raised him from the dead. What if God has had enough of our pussy-footing around making nice like American Christians, and actually expects us to get off our duffs and *be* something or *do* something other than what we've been or done so far?

In fact, what if God just showed up one day and took a look around and said, “Now look here, Jesus, I see how it is and I'm not impressed, okay? I've been waiting and watching and intervening for over two millennia now and all I'm seeing is pretty much same old, same old. And this despite the incredible investment on my part in the whole enterprise. I mean, who provided the soil and the rain and the fertilizer for this garden, anyway, never mind sending you as head gardener. But looking around now, I can't say I'm seeing just a whole lot of fruit being harvested. So how about we just cut down the whole damn tree and start over. Just you and me, know what I mean?”

And Jesus does know what God means. And really can't think of a single argument against the suggestion except...well...he's gone through an awful lot for this stubborn race of creatures and the truth is, he's gotten kind of attached.

“Look Dad, you've got a point; you really do. I understand where you're coming from, but listen: would you by chance be willing, as a special favor to me, to maybe

give me a little more time? Say another year? Just to see if a little more light, a little more lovin', maybe a few more tears, a birth, a death, perhaps a baptism or two, will get this garden growing? I'm thinking that maybe with a little more time and a little more attention, these folks will get it. Get the nutrients and nurturance of the life force we keep trying to give them. What do you say? Let's give it another try and then, if they bear fruit soon, well and good. If not, okay. You can go on and cut the whole thing down."

This is how I hear this morning's conversation between master and gardener, between Father and Son, in the latter half of today's passage. The gardener pleading with the owner for the grace of a little more time. I hear hope in it, but not infinite hope. And grace, too, when it's bargained for. I hear the *possibility* of redemption, but not the assurance of it. In fact, what's loudest to me in the dialogue is the tone of Master's holy impatience.

"Look here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?"

Why, indeed. Time is marching on and there is no time to waste. Closer and closer Jesus moves to Jerusalem, nearer and nearer he draws to his death, louder and straighter he preaches his message. There's an edge to Jesus' teaching now, for time is running out. Will they get it? Will his disciples grasp what they need to do? They're further down the road now; no more time for long parables and explanations. The stakes are raised; tempers shorten; social niceties fall away.

They're chatting about those Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. "You think they deserved that? Do you imagine they were any worse sinners than y'all?"

His disciples start in surprise. "Well, no, we weren't really thinking that way at all."

"Well, I'll tell you what," says Jesus. Unless you repent, you'll perish the same way they did."

Whoa. What's he so worked up about? Here he's just told the disciples in the previous chapter "not to worry" (12:22) and not to be afraid. (12:32) And now he's threatening that they'll perish the same way those Galileans did? Or those folks who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them?

But Jesus isn't talking about the way these people died. Death is not Jesus' primary concern, neither for himself nor for his disciples. When Jesus speaks of the disciples perishing the way the Galileans did, he isn't referring to the manner in which they died so much as the state of their souls.

The Greek word Luke has Jesus use for perish is "ha-POL-as-the," deriving from "ha-POL-u-mi," which carries the meaning not merely of the end of life, but of the end of any relationship with God. To perish in this way is to be "lost to God" eternally, as in "eternal death."¹ One who perishes in the manner of "ha-POL-u-mi" is lost to God forever.

Those Galileans and Jerusalemmites died "ha-POL-u-mi" because they had never repented. Because they never grasped either the depth of their sin or the height of

¹ Novum Testamentum Graece, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart, Germany, 1990, and A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, translated and adapted from Walter Bauer's Fifth Edition, 1958, by Arndt and Gingrich, 2nd ed, The University of Chicago Press, 1979. p. 95.

God's forgiveness, once they died they were lost to God forever. *Twice* in this short passage Jesus repeats, "unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

This is the core of the message Jesus seems so impatient to convey to his disciples: the fundamental importance to a life of faith of the act and state of repentance. At least this is how Luke sees it. In fact, the theme of repentance permeates practically the whole of Luke's gospel. And if you think Jesus sounds impatient now, you should have heard him in a few chapters earlier.

In chapter 11, he practically pummels his listeners for asking for a sign of God but then missing the most obvious one – him – and failing to repent. (11:29) Then, when this one Pharisee gets exercised because Jesus doesn't wash his hands before supper, Jesus launches on a tirade against all Pharisees and lawyers who, he declares, are all about external righteousness instead of repentance and inner transformation.

By the time the crowd around him gets really large in Chapter 12, Jesus becomes a veritable semi-automatic of uncompromising truths: "Everything covered up will become uncovered. Everything secret will become known. Y'all aren't getting away with a thing! Stop worrying so much about your body and fret more about your soul. I'm not telling you to be afraid, just get yourself together! Stay awake. Get ready. If you want to be a part of God's kingdom, you gotta be willing to work at it.

So get with the program!," says Jesus. "Time's running out! Heck, you can see signs of the weather and interpret them; how come can't you see and interpret the signs of the kingdom? They're all around you! Why don't you judge for yourselves what is right?" he asks pointedly in 12:57.

In chapter 12, Jesus bursts out, “Look, I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! “

Jesus has a baptism with which to be baptized and it's the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the baptism of repentance, the baptism of staring sin in the face and turning away from it', the baptism of turning toward God and placing your life in God's hands. How many times, how many ways, has he got to say it, be it, do it, for his disciples to get it? The closer Jesus gets to Jerusalem, the less patience he has.

The less patience *God* has. “I'm not seeing any fruit so let's just cut the durn tree down.” “Give it another year,” pleads the gardener. “Let me fuss with it a little longer, dig a little here, add some fertilizer there, and see if we can't get it to blossom next year, year after. If not, why, then you can cut it down.”

For all of his urgency, Jesus leaves room in his story for redemptive possibilities, for mercy, for second chances. The master seems out of patience but the gardener is willing to give us more time. Not all the time in the world, mind you, but enough time and attention and love and encouragement that we might flourish in the faith. Because flourishing is part of repentance, too. Repentance is not just about turning away from sin but also about turning toward new and abundant life.

One of the historic confessions of our church, the Heidelberg Catechism of 1567, asks the question, “How many parts are there to the true repentance or conversion of (humanity)? The answer is, “There are two parts to the true repentance: the dying of the old self and the birth of the new.” (Q. 88) Turning away from sin is only the first step

of the journey of repentance. The second is to move forward on the path of renewal, of transformation, of new and abundant life in God.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “The way most of us were taught it, repentance means owning up to how rotten you are. It means saying out loud, if only in the auditorium of your own soul, that you are a selfish, sinful, deeply defective human being who grieves the heart of God and that you are very, very sorry about it. It means dumping all your pride on the ground and stamping on it, since pride – as in ego, arrogance, vainglory – is the root of so much evil.

“Only what if it isn’t,” says Taylor. “What if pride isn’t the problem at all, but its very opposite? What if the main thing most of us need to repent of is not our arrogance but our utter despair – our stubborn insistence that things will never change for us, that we will never change, that no matter what we say or do we are stuck forever in the mess we have made of our lives, or the mess someone else has made of them, but in any case there is no hope for us, no beginning again, no chance of a new life. Now *that*,” says Taylor, “is a problem.”²

And the name of that problem is “ha-POL-u-mi,” the way of the godless lost in eternal darkness. For people of faith, this kind of perishing, this “ha-POL-u-mi,” is a lie. Just as despair is a lie, and Jesus has no patience for it. In the face of “ha-POL-u-mi,” when we imagine there’s no hope, no grace, no chance of new life, Jesus has nothing but a holy *impatience*, and nothing more to say to his followers except “REPENT.” Die to the lie of that false self and be born to the truth of God’s new one for you.

² God in Pain - Teaching Sermons On Suffering, Barbara Brown Taylor, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1998, p.24.

Says Taylor, “this kind of repentance is far more interested in God than in our own personal foibles. This kind of repentance spends more time looking at the kingdom than in the mirror. It has more faith in God’s power to make new than in our own power to mess up.”³ And those of us who commit ourselves to a life of repentance and return will not give up on ourselves, no matter how many times we have to repeat the process.” Why? “Because we believe in God’s goodness more than we believe in our own or anybody else’s badness.”

In this Lenten season as we prepare for the heart-breaking death and heart-healing resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, let us recommit ourselves to a life of repentance and return, no matter how many times we have to repeat the process. God hasn’t given up on us yet, but we don’t have forever. For “unless we repent, we will perish, just as they all did.”

To the glory of God. Amen.

³ Ibid. p. 3.