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St. Luke's Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
The Third Sunday in Lent – February 28, 2016
Luke 13: 1-9

“So, how is it going so far?” Many of us have made commitments to give something up, or we have decided to take on a new discipline to honor the holy season of Lent. It can be quite a challenge to adhere to a new behavior or discipline that requires our constant attention, as old habits are hard break. It can be unduly difficult to resist the temptation to go back to our same old ways whether it be eating the chocolate or drinking the wine, or we may be just too busy to take time for prayer and daily devotion. It's just too hard, and well, is it really necessary? Let us be reminded that Lent is a season of the Christian year when our focus is to be upon simple living, or simplicity, prayer, and fasting in order to grow closer to God. Yet Lent is also a time for reflection and repentance, for it is when we repent, that we are able to turn toward God to closer to God.

Today's reading from the gospel of Luke may take us to a place that makes us uncomfortable, or uneasy. In fact some biblical scholars refer to this gospel passage as one of the “hard-sayings” of Jesus, as it addresses repentance, sin and judgement. These words tend to make us squeamish or unsettled. In fact for many of us, when we hear the word repent we may experience a feeling of fear or admonition. Yet, the word repent ought not to be a word that evokes such emotions. The word repent is derived from two verbs from biblical Hebrew, shum (pronounced **shoom**) and nacham (pronounced **nah-hahm**), which are at the root of the word ‘repentance.’ Shum means to turn back, while nah-hahm translates as to be sorry. These words are translated to the Greek word metanoia (pronounced **met-an'-oy-ah**) which means ‘change of mind.

As we are talking about repentance, please allow me to take an opportunity to review and reflect upon Ash Wednesday, which marks the first day of Lent. This is not to go backwards, but it is important to touch on, as because life subtly creeps in, this is to remind us of the significance of Lent. On Ash Wednesday, we receive ashes on our foreheads in the sign of a cross. The purpose for this is twofold. The ashes remind us of our mortality and sin, while the cross reminds us of the resurrection. The imposition of ashes can be traced back to our Jewish and Christian roots, as when people were remorseful for something they did, they would put ashes upon their forehead, and often don 'sack-cloth', which was known to be itchy, to remind them of the discomfort of sin. This is illustrated throughout the books of the Old Testament, including Isaiah and Jeremiah, to remind us that sin results in the death of the spirit and, to ask for forgiveness. Ash Wednesday encourages us to recognize our own mortality, repent by turning away from our sins, and return to our loving God. When we make this effort to turn toward God, it is then that we have the opportunity to become more Christ-like.

Today's passage of Jesus using the parable of the fig tree speaks to impending judgement, but there is more to it than this. Parables are a Jewish style of storytelling, from stories of everyday life. It's important to remember that the true meaning behind parables is never obvious. When Jesus uses parables, it is to teach us to look beyond the palpable, or to challenge us to think more deeply about the issues. I think it is safe to say that parables often produce more questions than answers, as they inspire us to look beyond the obvious to discern or seek the deeper meaning that Jesus is trying to teach us. The parable of the fig tree, though somewhat differing in content, is mentioned in the gospel of Matthew, Mark and Luke, and it is significant to our Christian walk. In Luke's gospel the fig tree serves as a metaphor for us. As baptized Christians we are called to bear good fruit. When we do not bear fruit, we are not being

subservient toward God. So what exactly does this mean for us? What is it too be bearers of good fruit? Paul's letter to the Galatians makes this clear for us, as it is recorded "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." (Galatians 5:22). Repentance, hence changing our minds and turning toward God, and bearing good fruit, is key themes in this gospel. Jesus, as the gardener, is merciful to us. He intercedes on our behalf, as he knows of our weakness, yet He also knows that we are more than capable of bearing good fruit. But it is up to us to make that decision, as God has given each of us free will. So we have the choice, do we turn away from sin and turn toward God? Or do we remain in an unfruitful place of comfort and complacency?

Repentance is not about guilt. Repentance is about new life and turning toward God, Ironically, it is when we turn toward God that we are freed from guilt. When we step outside of our comfort zone, yes, of course it can be unsettling; in fact you can pretty much guarantee that it will be. But in order to live a life closer to God we are required to step out in faith, which sometimes necessitates that we leave our comfort zones, in order for us to bear good fruit. It is simply more comfortable for us to say, "Okay, God. I will give you my living room and my study, but I really need to keep the rest of my house." This is simply an analogy for giving our whole self to God, not just a portion of ourselves. For it is when we give ourselves wholly to God we become free from sin, fear and death.

We have a choice; God loved us so much that He gave us free will. Life is fleeting. What choice are you going to make? The rewards are ominous, as we have hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Turn away from sin and turn toward God the Father almighty.

Let us pray

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, the shepherd of Israel, their pillar of cloud by day, their pillar of fire by night. In these forty days you lead us into the desert of repentance

That in this pilgrimage of prayer we might learn to be your people once more. In fasting and service you bring us back to your heart. You open our eyes to your presence in the world and you free our hands to lead others to the radiant splendor of your mercy. Be with us in these journey days for without you we are lost and will perish. To you alone be dominion and glory, Forever and ever, Amen.