

Who among us has not cried out [if only internally] “I want a do-over!” All of us have been faced with situations that we would handle differently if we could do them again. There’s nothing that sheds light on possible alternatives to a sticky problem like a good night’s sleep, something nourishing to eat, the calm of a new day, and the sage counsel of a trusted friend. Once we calm down, we seem to be able to think more clearly...and that’s also when we seem to want a ‘Do over.’ “Let me try this again,” we think. Sometimes we get a second chance. And sometimes we don’t.

Through the Lenten season this year we are travelling with Jesus and his disciples in the gospel of Luke as they make their way toward Jerusalem. Along the way, Jesus is healing and teaching and modeling for his followers how they need to think about things and how they need to behave. He’s sharing with them the experience of the nature of God. Luke’s gospel begins with John the Baptist so we know that in this gospel repentance is an essential step for this community of Christians as they move toward the realm of God just as it is for us. We also know that the audience for the gospel of Luke was expecting Jesus to return to them momentarily...not as if he had ascended into heaven, but as if he had gone off to run an errand and would be right back. His delay shapes the way the author of Luke speaks to this Christian community anxious for Jesus to return. And this gospel helps us, too, in dealing with the delay.

This morning, we’ve heard a passage from Luke that actually sounds like two passages that are unrelated. The first part of the passage is verses 1-5 and the second part is verses 6-9. The first passage is a question from some unidentified people who were ‘present’ with Jesus and the disciples. They are filled with moral outrage about the massacre of the Galilean pilgrims by King Herod and they are heartbroken about the 18 men who died when the tower of Siloam in Jerusalem collapsed. They ask the same questions we ask when we’re faced with similar

circumstances: “Why?” Why did this happen? And why were some people spared and others were not? Were the people who died bad people who had it coming to them? Is that why they died? What about all the people in Honolulu, Hawaii on December 7, 1941 just waking up on a lazy Sunday morning. And what about all the people in the twin towers on 911 who were just starting their workday? What about all the people who were late to work that day and survived the massacre? What about all the people in Ukraine who find themselves in the middle of a devastating war that they did not start? The seeming randomness of all these deaths puzzles and worried us.

Jesus’ answer to these questions about the murder of the Galileans and the accidental deaths of those at Siloam is to tell us all that “No, they were not worse sinners than those who did not die.” Jesus is quite clear in refuting the notion that suffering and sin are connected. That was a widely held notion in Jesus’ day and even today...2,000 years later...there are still those who will tell us that the latest natural disaster has occurred because the people who were affected were all sinners and had all strayed away from God and they deserved what happened to them. Well, we’re all sinners and we all deserve to die, so Jesus doesn’t seem to agree with that theology. But he does add to his statement, “...but unless you repent, you will perish just as they did!”

Uh-oh! What does Jesus mean when he says that? What is he talking about when he says “Repent?” We know what he’s *not* talking about. He’s not talking about feeling regret for something we have done, although that’s not a bad thing. He’s not talking about our saying that we are sorry even though we are. And he’s not even telling us to change direction, although that comes a bit closer. And we know that we are all going to die at some point whether we repent or not. Is Jesus telling us that we will die in some terrible tragedy if we don’t repent? No, He just said the two were not connected. Did he just contradict himself? Not exactly, but his message does need to be picked apart a bit to be understood.

Let’s take the whole notion of ‘perish’ first. Earthly death does not mean that we ‘perish.’ We believe in the resurrection, so we know that we will not perish. Our earthly life will still come to an end...perhaps in an accident, but that’s not connected to whether or not we repent. What

Jesus is talking about is the death, not of our bodies, but of our souls...the very essence of who we are. So what do these two stories we just heard tell us about what the gospel of Luke wants us to know?

The people who died in these tragedies were not worse than the people who were spared a belief that Jesus emphasizes; but they did die unprepared. Jesus is encouraging his followers...and that includes us...to get prepared. Tragedies are like an alarm that goes off. They get our attention. They remind us of how lucky we are. They remind us of how fragile life truly is. They stir us up a bit as well they should. They put us in the mind-frame of wanting to be prepared. We even make that request in the Great Litany when we ask God to deliver us from dying suddenly and unprepared. Getting prepared involves repentance. But what does that mean? We are right when we think of repentance as changing direction, but that's not all of it. Repentance does involve change. To repent is to turn away from the assumptions, the attitudes and the actions we are accustomed to and live toward the values and practices of the Realm of God that Jesus has taught us. Oh, boy! We already know that's going to be hard because everything that Jesus taught us is contrary to human nature. If we're going to turn away from attitudes and actions that we're accustomed to, we're going to be swimming upstream. We can be morally upright and still not be repentant. We can be pious in our practices and still not be repentant. We can be very good people and still not be repentant.

The repentant Christian is the one not only with an open heart, but with an open mind. The repentant Christian is the one who is open to change and to new information and to a different perspective... and also to the exquisite experience of being awed and surprised by God. The repentant Christian is pliable and flexible. The repentant Christian embraces new ideas and new experiences and new possibilities. The repentant Christian is the one who sets his/her own will aside and allows God to make necessary changes. When we say that prayer does not change the situation but changes us, this is what we mean. Prayer does change us. The repentant Christian allows God to change them...heart, mind, and soul. The repentant Christian is the one who has completely let go and let God. And as we seek to follow Christ; as we turn our attention toward repentance in an effort to prepare ourselves for the Realm of God, we are not left to our own devices. Jesus continues his call to repentance by telling us the parable of the

barren fig tree. This little tree has not born fruit for three years and the owner wants to cut it down because it's wasting space that could be given to another tree. The gardener steps in to advocate for the little barren tree. "Let me dig around it and put manure on it," he says, "and we'll see if it finally bears fruit." St. Augustine was very clear on the symbolic importance of manure. It is a sign of humility. That humility is Jesus Christ himself. While we were still barren...still in sin...Christ died for us. Christ feeds us with himself. And the Holy Scriptures feed and teach us and challenge us. The more we are willing to set aside our own will in favor of God's will for us, the more truly humble we become. And the more prepared we are for the Realm of God. And the more likely we are to bear fruit. And we know what the fruits are. We don't have to guess. They are the qualities that permeate everything we do, everything we say and every decision we make. The actions we take (or don't take), the words we speak (or don't say) and the conclusions we reach are all guided by the fruits of the spirit. They are described to us by St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians[5:22-23] and you know them well: ".....the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." These are the characteristics that we are called upon to nurture and develop and we do not do that alone. We do that with prayer, with Holy Communion, with Holy Scripture, and by building community with one another. For Jesus did not ask us to follow him alone, but to travel two by two promising that when two or three were gathered together in his name he would be there also. And we know that Jesus keeps his promises.

God did not leave us alone to figure this out all by ourselves without anyone to teach us or to scold us or to advocate for us or to encourage us. That person is Jesus Christ who still teaches us and still scolds us and still advocates for us and still encourages us even to this day. He has shown us the way and we are safe in his hands.

And He always provides us with a second chance.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.

*Sermon written by and originally preached on March 24, 2019 by The Rev. Elizabeth W. Tomlinson