

*Third Sunday in Lent*

March 24, 2019

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Luke. (Luke 13: 1-9)

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. [Jesus] asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener 'See 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?' He replied, 'Sir, 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.'"

The Gospel of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Is anybody here familiar with Siri, or Alexa, or Google Assistant, or Cortana? I see some heads going. They are these artificial intelligence assistants that can answer questions, or control lights, or play music. So, for example, I brought Siri along. So, I might say, "Hey, Siri, what is eight times fifty-three?" Oh, she wrote it down. "8 x 53 is 424." But there are places Siri will not go. "Hey, Siri, what is the meaning of life?" "I can't believe you are asking this of an inanimate object!" There are places Siri will not go. There are some answers that she will not give. They are the wrong questions.

Today, some people came to Jesus with the wrong questions. They start out with some juicy gossip. "*Pilate murdered some people from Galilee as they were offering sacrifices in the Temple.*" The unasked question is, "Why did this happen?" "How did God let it happen?" Or, the corollary, "Can we stop it from happening to us?" These, for Jesus, are the wrong questions.

Jesus has no patience with this. He shrugs it off. “Did God punish these people because they were worse sinners than anyone else?” “No.” That’s his whole answer. “No.” Then he adds, “*But unless you repent you will all perish as they did.*” Now, nobody is real clear on the “as they did” part, and I’m not going to go into that today. But I do want to look at this call to “repent.”

Repent. When we hear the word “repent,” we often think “feel really sorry for what I’ve done.” We think, “Stop being bad, and start being good.” But when the word “repent” is being used in the Bible—and it’s used a lot by Jesus and a lot by John the Baptist—when it’s used in the Bible, it means, “think a different way.” It means, “reorient yourself.” It means, “change the way you see the world.” Repentance is about reorientation.

Think about it this way. If you knew the world was ending, say, next Tuesday, how would you spend your afternoon today? What would you do this afternoon if you knew the world was ending on Tuesday? I’m thinking you probably would not be working on your taxes. I’m thinking you wouldn’t be cleaning out the garage, or finishing the homework that is due on Wednesday. I think there might be a lot more long walks, being with friends, seeking forgiveness, watching the sunset. There may be more reconnecting with God or with each other.

If the world was ending on Tuesday, I think there would be a radical reorienting of our priorities, of our goals, of our dreams. We would see everything in a totally new way. Future earnings. So what? National borders. Who cares? 2020 election. Not an issue. We would be rethinking everything, if the world was ending.

Okay. Chances are good the world won’t end on Tuesday. Sorry, you’re still going to have to do your taxes. But it gives you a sense of this “change the way you think.” “See the world in a new way.”

In the same way, when Jesus says to repent, Jesus is calling us to a radical reorienting of how we see the world. A new vision of what is real, what is vital, what gives life. Only it’s not because the world is ending on Tuesday. Jesus doesn’t say, “Repent” because the world is going to end. He says “repent” because a new world is beginning. A new world is taking hold. “*The time is fulfilled,*” Jesus says in his first sermon. “*The kingdom of God is at hand.*”

A little later in Luke he will say, “*the kingdom is near,*” and even later, “*the kingdom is among you.*” A loving, life-giving God is at the center of the world, and bringing a new creation into being. Can you see it? Can you let it begin to change you, to reorient the way you see the world?

This new reality that Jesus brings goes by many names. Jesus calls it “*the kingdom of God.*” In Matthew it’s called “*the kingdom of heaven.*” I’ve heard it called “God’s reign.” My favorite is Bishop Desmond Tutu’s words: “The dream of God.” This dream of God.

Imagine with me for a moment what God dreams about for this world. In God's dreams, you are loved and gifted. The world tells us we are not good enough. But in God's dreams, you are enough. You are so enough. I cannot tell you how enough you are. Good enough, gifted enough, loved and needed enough. Because that is how God created you. Enough, and able to grow into more.

In God's dreams, there is abundance. God gives the community abundance together. So, generosity and hospitality are so much more important than getting and having. Community is more important than competition. Power with is more important than power over.

In God's dreams, you are enough, there is enough, and we are all connected. Every Single One Of Us. Black, brown, white, gay, straight, Christian, Muslim, Jew, rich, poor, all abilities, all worldviews. All Of Us are valued and connected. Pain and joy are shared. Forgiveness is practiced. We hold and care for each other. We are honest, and vulnerable, and we work things out.

That is what Jesus is calling us into. A world where we are connected to God and each other. A world where there is enough and we are enough. That is what Jesus is calling us to live within and work toward. Jesus calls us to repent. To reorient toward these dreams of God.

"Okay. That's great," we say. "But we live in the real world. So many bad things are still happening! How can God be working among us? How can the dreams of God be here if so much horror is happening?"

If a loving, life-giving God is at the center of this world, why do bad things happen? If God is bringing a new creation into being, why do towers fall on unsuspecting people, or Pilates get away with murder? Jesus doesn't answer that question. It is still the wrong question. Instead, Jesus calls us to repent. He reminds us to reorient ourselves for the world and for the neighbor.

Is it really our job to explain tragedy or to sit in judgment? Or, as people of God, do we sit with those who weep or grieve, offering a hand, offering our heart? Do we divide people into good people and bad people, wanted and unwanted, insiders and outsiders? Or, as people of God, do we welcome, offer hospitality, walk alongside, no matter what? Do we look away from those in need, look away from pain or death? Judge it. Or can we trust that God is working among us, bringing healing and resurrection, so death has no ultimate power, and we can walk with those in pain. Because we know the end is life.

God's dreams are coming to be among us, even now. As we repent, as we reorient, we can start seeing them growing, even here.

I think about last Wednesday, as I was getting ready to leave at the end of a very long day, I discovered a staff member, at the end of an equally long day, speaking tenderly to a homeless woman. Providing hospitality, trying to find her resources, recognizing her as a valued child of God.

I think about a week or so ago when one of the kids in the kids' choir said to Miss Chris that she was giving up worrying for Lent. Of course, she can set aside worries. She is a child of God, connected to God, connected to a loving community.

I think about an e-mail conversation I had yesterday with a man who was worried about one of his neighbors. And the neighborhood was texting together, trying to come up with some solutions. This is what God's dreams realized look like.

"Repent," says Jesus. See the world in a new way. See the kingdom growing among you.

Today, we will together commit to paying down our mortgage in the Pathway to the Future Campaign, so more of the ministry and mission of the dreams of God can thrive.

Next month, we will begin a year of mission renewal, looking at where God is leading us in the future, so that these dreams can grow here among us.

And I'll ask today, where else can you see the dreams of God coming to pass – in your home, in your schools, in your neighborhoods? I challenge you this week in repentance, in reorientation, to start seeing the kingdom in your midst. Finish this sentence for me this week: "I saw God's dreams when . . ."

God is working here. God is like a loving gardener helping us grow into what God intends. All of us together. And we can see it. And it all begins with repentance.

Amen.