

March 20, 2022 - "Do We Really Need to Wait?"

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Luke 13:1-9

¹ There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² And Jesus answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? ³ I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. ⁴ Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? ⁵ I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish."

⁶ He also spoke this parable: "A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. ⁷ Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?' ⁸ But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. ⁹ And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.'"

A little boy was riding along with his father from New Mexico to Colorado. They were traveling 250 miles to go fishing. Every fifty miles the excited son asked his father if they were almost there. The father answered that they had quite a distance to travel yet. So the son waited a few more minutes and asked his father again. "Sorry, son, we have another hundred miles yet."

After fifty more miles the son asked, "Daddy, am I still going to be four years old when we get there?"

Waiting, it's not always the easiest thing to do, is it? Yet, wait we must sometimes, usually more than we like. We want things we have planned to happen immediately, without flaws. We demand answers to our questions, yesterday, not tomorrow! We expect expediency to our requests. And why shouldn't we expect it? We live in a culture that pushes fast service in order to be productive and improve earnings. Our technology generates information and provides services that accommodates and further fuels this feeling of immediacy.

We discover a different attitude towards waiting in the scriptures. Many stories in the Bible illustrate moments when people needed to wait. For example, remember Abram, whom we talked about last week. He and Sarai had to wait quite some time for God to fulfill his promise to them that they would have a child. Yet in the same story, we learn that Abram doesn't fool around when God calls him to pack everything and head out to a place where he would lead Abram. In the end, not without challenges, God's promise was fulfilled.

The scripture reading for today includes a message to us about waiting, the discernment of when to wait and when not to wait. This scripture follows shortly after a time of teaching when Jesus, once again said, that he would leave this world but would return sometime in the future. He also said that a kingdom was being prepared for his followers. And one day, when he returns, he will take his followers to be with him in this kingdom.

This involves waiting, for a time when Jesus will return. Jesus instructs his followers, however, that while they wait, they should be actively seeking and building their relationship with God, following Christ's example of serving others, and helping to build God's kingdom with believers even now in this lifetime. Jesus warns in this portion of Luke that even in the waiting for his return there is a required immediacy in preparing for his return.

Then when we get to today's scripture, Jesus' message takes on a more urgent tone. It comes on the heels of some questions brought to him surrounding two tragedies that occurred.

The stories leave out a lot of the facts surrounding the disasters, but theologians considered the history of the time and speculate about what happened.

The first is in reference to a water problem in Jerusalem that Pilate decided, rightly so, needed to be fixed. He decided to finance it with temple monies. The Jews were up in arms over that idea, and they gathered to protest it. As they gathered, Pilate instructed his soldiers to disguise themselves by wearing cloaks over their battle garb and under their garb they were to carry cudgels, a short thick stick, which they were to use to disperse the crowd when the signal was given. Unfortunately, the soldiers got a little carried away and many people were killed, some of which were Galileans. The Jews believed that these Galileans were killed because they were sinners.

The second disaster involved eighteen people who decided to work on the building of the aqueducts for Pilate. The Jews were already upset that Pilate stole temple money to build the aqueducts, and now some of their own people were helping to build them. The Jews believed that a tower in Siloam fell on these people because they consented to help with the project.

The people asked Jesus after reminding him of these: "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" Those asking the question would have believed that those who died at these two events died as a punishment for their sinfulness. They also believed that one could suffer as a result of their parents' sins.

The notion that disaster comes as punishment for sin is found elsewhere in the Old Testament, especially in the blessings and warnings of Deuteronomy 28-30. It also appears in John 9:2, with the question the people asked Jesus as to whether a particular man was blind because of his own sin or the sin of his parents. Jesus answered saying the man's blindness had nothing to do with either's sin. He pointed out the reality that you and I know, that even good people experience suffering.

The beliefs held by the people confronting Jesus about these two tragedies were cruel and heartbreaking doctrines. In this text, Jesus neither disputes or affirms the connection between sin and disaster. There is no blanket principle to this quandary. Clearly, sometimes sin does result in tragedy, brought on by our own choices, not necessarily God's punishment. And other adversities come on by accident.

Jesus appears less interested in clearing up this dilemma; and has a more essential point to make. His response to those listening to him that day pointed out that the people killed in both of the tragedies mentioned were no more sinners than those asking him about this. But for those killed in those tragedies, time had run out for them to repent of their sins. And so, he goes on to warn them again to repent before it's too late.

There's a sense of urgency in Jesus' call to repentance for the people listening to him that day, and for all people throughout time, yes, including you and me. The warning is just as real for us: repentance cannot be delayed, for death may come at any time. Repentance needs to be an ongoing attitude toward one's life, rather than an occasional act.

Death is not something most of us relish thinking about a lot. It's usually on the back burner of our consciousness, unless we are getting older, and we know our time in this lifetime is limited, or unless we are facing our own or a loved one's life-threatening illness, or unless we lose a loved one, it's especially troubling on our minds when it occurs at a young age. At those times we realize how fragile life is and it is brought to our attention that we should live each day to its fullest.

Lent also reminds us that this life is temporary. Particularly, on Ash Wednesday we are reminded that it was from dust that we were created by God, and one day we will return to dust.

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It's in-between the two where we find ourselves waiting, again, most times not consciously. Like the people killed in the tragedies previously mentioned, we do not always have a warning for when our time in this lifetime will come to an end.

Jesus does not say that we should be obsessed with fear and panic about death. In fact, his call to ongoing repentance relieves our anxieties because we know then that when the time comes for us to leave this lifetime, we will move onto an eternal lifetime in the place that has been prepared for us. Jesus does not want us to miss out on the joys and blessings we receive while living in this lifetime; but he also wants us to prepare ourselves for the future.

Jesus went on to tell a parable about an unproductive fig tree. The owner of the fig tree determines that the tree should be cut down, as it was taking up fertile space where another, more productive tree could grow. The gardener, on the other hand, makes a plea for the tree, asking to give the tree another year in which to produce fruit. He would dig around the tree and fertilize it, giving it the best chance possible to produce. If it still did not produce, then he too agreed that it should be cut down and removed.

Through this parable, we are to understand that there is more than one chance to repent, perhaps softening the blow of urgency. But at the same time, the second chances will come to an end eventually, and no one knows when that will be.

George Whitefield, prolific itinerant preacher, mentioned in his journal that during his first voyage to Georgia, the ship's cook had a bad drinking problem. When the cook was reprimanded for it and other sins, he boasted that he would be wicked until the last two years of his life, and then he would reform. Whitefield added that within six hours of the time the cook made his boastful statement, he died of an illness related to his drinking.

The parable makes the clear point that repentance and productivity are expected. Repentance not only removes the filth of sin from our lives through God's forgiveness, but it launches us into action. It's through repentance that we recognize our need for God. This need drives our hunger to know God, to seek him out, to have the soil of our lives turned over and fertilized by His Word and His presence in our lives. We are to be productive in availing ourselves to the nurturing of our faith and in our relationship with God.

Repentance not only demands change in our personal lives; but it also propels us into action, to be productive, in the work of building God's Kingdom here on earth. In regard to this effort, the parable seems to speak to the virtue of patience, to withhold judgment on others, and instead help others to know what it really means to have a relationship with God. Just as God has done for us in giving us second chances, he expects us to do the same for others. All the while we need to be aware of the fact, with sadness, that there is only so much that we can do to lead others to Christ. The final decision is theirs.

There is a time to wait and then there are times when waiting may lead to being too late. Almost with urgency in his cry to us, Jesus tells us not to wait to repent as often as we may need, but every day repent of our sin. Along with repentance, we are to be changed and reshaped, as we live each day according to God's will, being alert and diligent in the care and nurturing of our own faith, as well as helping others find Jesus before it is too late for them, even as we wait for Christ's return for us. Yes, we are living in days of waiting, not without hope and the promise of new life everlasting; but with joy and anticipation, fulfilling each day with purpose and meaning, until that day. Amen.