

The Garden of Repentance – Luke 13:1-9

Pastor Colin Rieke ~ March 19, 2014

¹Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. ² Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? ³ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. ⁴ Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.” ⁶ Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. ⁷ So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ ⁸ “ ‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’ ”



This is the day the Lord has made let us rejoice and be glad in it,

Two weeks ago we heard God announce in the Garden of Eden the very first promise to send us a Savior. Last week we focused on how God announces the promise of salvation in Christ to the whole world. Today we look at God’s objective in proclaiming Christ to us. We might call it the Garden of Repentance.

To understand this Garden of Repentance and our need for it, we must understand something about our world. Tragedies happen in our world – both manmade and natural. A natural question to ask is “Why?” Why did 9/11 happen? Why was Gabrielle Giffords shot? Why did Hurricane Sandy hit the east coast in 2012? Why the drought in California this year?

Some people say it is God’s judgment on all those people for being sinners. While that is true in a general sense, sin in this world brings about tragedies both direct and indirect. But we cannot read the mind of God to know why certain people suffer particularly harsh things. God doesn’t say that in his Word. That’s a mystery hidden in God’s unsearchable will.

A similar approach on the opposite side of the spectrum is thinking if we haven’t suffered a tragedy like these, then we are innocent, or at least less sinful than others. Again, the Bible never describes it in this way. We’re no less sinful than people who suffer tragedy. Rather, God makes it clear in the Bible that he wants all of us to take all such events to heart. He wants such events to strike fear so that we examine our own hearts and lives for sin and then repent. He desires to change our thinking on things so that we turn to him for rescue.

Part of the problem that stands in the way of us having a relationship with God is that we tend to think we are fine and okay just the way we are. But God describes us on our own as being totally evil and incapable of good down to the bottom of our hearts. But we don’t perceive that or feel it in ourselves. We usually feel quite justified in what we do. The idea of God might even bring on warm feelings of a big friend. We don’t usually feel his anger. We don’t tend to move under a sense of foreboding that God’s

judgment is upon us. Martin Luther rightly said our sinfulness is something that has to be believed rather than felt.

So God may allow, even send, bad things to wake us up to what the situation really is. If sinfulness in general can bring on such horrible things from him such as car accidents, disease, earthquakes, and loneliness here on earth, it is downright scary to imagine what kinds of punishments our sins would bring on us for eternity in hell.

That's the point Jesus is making here in Luke chapter 13. We are to use earthly disasters not to say, "Hah, those people are getting theirs!" but rather, "Lord, have mercy on *me*!" We read from Luke chapter 13,

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

We might get the idea that God is quick to punish and send disaster, but if we read further on in this section we see how the exact opposite is true. Jesus uses a parable about a garden to illustrate God's loving patience with us. We might call it the Garden of Repentance. We read: **"Then [Jesus] told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, "For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?"'"**

Now note the amazing patience of the gardener: **"'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down'"** Yet another year he gives it. Granted, eventually, if the tree doesn't change, it'll be cut down. But this man is in no hurry. He puts it off, like he wants to avoid doing the tree any harm. To the contrary, he gives it more TLC than ever before. He wants to give the tree every chance.

When I see or hear of some tragedy, instead of thinking, "How could a loving God do that to those people!" I can conclude, "Wow, look how patient God has been with *me*! He hasn't cut me down yet! I'm not any better than those poor people. I am sorry for their pain, and I'll do what I can to alleviate it. But at the same time, I will be grateful that God has given *me*:

- yet another day to repent,
- yet another day to find where sin still exists in my life and get rid of it,
- yet another day to seek and be assured of his forgiveness,
- yet another day to serve him with my life as I am covered with his forgiveness,

- yet another day to tell others the good news of how God has rescued us from horrible things like sin, tragedies, death, and hell so that they might believe it too.

That's why the Savior came. That's what Lent is about. Jesus took on himself the punishment that we had coming from God. When Jesus was hanging on the cross, God aimed all of his divine, holy anger at Jesus. By Jesus' death on a cross, God's justice on the human race was served. God declares you and me and all people forgiven in Christ.

All who rely on Jesus Christ as their Savior now have God as their friend. Through faith in Jesus our sins are forgiven; tragedies, even personal tragedies, for us who believe, are not punishments but are altered into God's loving governance for our good; even death itself, for us who rely on Jesus, becomes nothing more than a joyful sleep from which we will awake one day and rise up from our graves to live with Christ forever in paradise. As we rely on Jesus, we are comforted that God has nothing but the most loving intentions toward us. He is even reluctant to bring the world to a close as he wants all people to have a chance to believe in Jesus as their Savior.

How can I turn to Christ, and how can I know I have God's forgiveness? God himself meets me through his Word, whether written in the Bible or spoken, through Baptism, and through the Lord's Supper. That's where he gives us his forgiveness and where his Spirit changes our perspective on everything. No longer do we live under threat and fear but, rather, under the joyful shelter of God's love. His Word, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper—that's the fertilizer which the gardener in the parable uses year after year. That's the food by which the Holy Spirit keeps our reliance on Jesus alive, keeps our relationship with God alive. You can know it yourself: "I have been baptized. I have heard it from the mouth of my pastor. I have received Christ's own body and blood in the Lord's Supper. I am forgiven. I am loved by God. I don't need to fear anything that might happen to me on this earth." We keep coming back for more, and God keeps giving it to us through his Word and sacraments so that we stay green and living and fruitful in our relationship with him.

It was in a garden, by a tree, that sin first entered the world. It was on a tree that Jesus died and paid for the sins of the whole world. By giving us faith in Christ, God makes us each a living tree that thrives in the Garden of Repentance. Amen.