

## I

A few days ago, I had the opportunity sit at the bedside of a friend whose remaining days on earth were growing short. At the age of 79, his cancer had come back, so that night at his bedside, we talked about life, about death, and about life beyond death. And a few days later, he breathed his last and died.

Sometimes, we pastors get to stand on holy ground. In the story of Exodus, God tells Moses to take off his shoes, because the place where he is standing is holy ground – not because that particular piece of dirt was special, but because for a few moments, the Lord was in that place. And that little hospital room on that night, as we talked together as men of faith about what was past, what was present, and what was yet to come, became for a few moments holy ground.

## II

But of course, you and I both know that not everyone gets that gift of knowing that they are living in their final days. You and I both know people who have died suddenly and unexpectedly. You and I both know that tomorrow is not guaranteed to any one of us, a lesson that has been driven home all the more directly as we approach the one-year anniversary of the pandemic.

Despite all of our advances in medicine and all of the measures we take to try to keep ourselves and those whom we love safe, sometimes, death comes without any advance warning. And when that happens, it often leaves us struggling mightily to try to make sense of something senseless.

For example, on that terrible September morning years ago when airplanes were hijacked and intentionally crashed into buildings, it wasn't long before some people were on television loudly proclaiming that this senseless and chaotic spilling of innocent blood was somehow God's way of punishing America for our sins.

A few years later, a devastating hurricane ravaged the Gulf Coast. And as so often happens, the people who suffered the most were the most vulnerable, especially the very old, the very young, and the very poor. Scores of people died suddenly and tragically. But before the waters had even begun to recede, some people were back on television once again, loudly proclaiming that a hurricane of such ferocity was God's just punishment for America's sins.

Both of these events, and scores of others like them in the years since, have left people of faith asking difficult questions and searching for elusive answers. And that same search for meaning in the face of death, the same struggle to make sense of something so senseless, happened in Jesus' day, too.

### III

This winter and spring, we're reading and preaching our way through the Gospel According to Luke. And last week, we read that Jesus has set his face to go from Galilee down to Jerusalem, where we know that he will be betrayed and crucified. And as he makes his way to the fate that awaits him there, his journey is interrupted with some startling news. So listen now for a Word from God from Luke 13:1-9 and 31-35.

*1 At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2 He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4 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? 5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." 6 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. 7 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?" 8 He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can*

*cut it down.' "*

*31 At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." 32 He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. 33 Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' 34 Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! 35 See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.' "*

Jesus has set his face to go to Jerusalem. The march to the cross and the tomb and whatever lies beyond has begun.

But on the way, Jesus receives a report about some Galileans just like him who had once went to Jerusalem, too. And while they were there, for some indeterminate reason, or perhaps even no reason at all, the Roman governor Pontius Pilate had seen to it that "their blood was mingled with their sacrifices."

It's possible, maybe even likely, that Jesus and the disciples knew some

of the Galileans who were the victims of this senseless violence, or at least knew their families and friends. And perhaps these unnamed messengers have delivered this story to Jesus now in an effort to get him to turn aside from his determined walk to Jerusalem.

Apparently, around the same time that the Galileans died because of human malice, another tragedy had unfolded in Jerusalem. A stone tower built into the wall of the city had suddenly collapsed, instantly killing eighteen people who had the misfortune of simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

In the case of the Galileans, their deaths were caused by human malice. In the case of those trapped under the ruins of the tower of Siloam, their deaths were caused by an accident. But both events left people of faith wondering aloud if those that died so suddenly and violently were somehow being punished by God for their sins.

And so Jesus, upon hearing these reports, asks a question of his own. “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 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?”

In other words, do you think that these people died because they were worse sinners than anyone else? Do you really think God used Pilate’s hands or

falling bricks to exact punishment? Do you really think that people who work in an office building or soldiers and sailors who serve in the Pentagon or residents of the Gulf Coast are somehow worse sinners than everyone else in America?

In every case, the question is answered by Jesus a resounding no. Jesus makes it clear that the Galileans did not die because they were worse sinners than other Galileans. Jesus makes it clear that those killed by the collapse of the tower did not die because they were the worst offenders in all Jerusalem. And by extension, acts of human malice and accidents and natural disasters are not God’s punishment for our sins.

But that leaves us asking another difficult question. Then why? Why do some people die sudden, even violent deaths, at sometimes heartbreakingly young ages, when others die old and full of years and are gathered to their people?

Jesus doesn’t answer that question. Oh, I wish so much that he would. I wish so much he would make order and sense out of our world that is far too often chaotic and senseless. But he doesn’t. Instead, he makes this conversation far more personal, and to be honest, more uncomfortable. He warns each of us, “Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

IV

Unless you repent.

I don't know about you, my friend, but when I hear that phrase, I think of people walking around downtown wearing sandwich boards shouting at passers-by about the coming end of the world.

I don't know about you, but usually when I hear the word repentance, positive images don't come to mind. I often think repentance gets couched as some sort of afterlife insurance policy or a seat reservation - you know, smoking or non-smoking. Conversations about repentance, especially here in the Bible belt, seem to have far more to do with what happens after we die than what we do about how we are to live. So maybe we need to revisit the word, "repent."

The word "repent" is closely tied to the word, "turn." To repent, in a literal sense, then, is to turn around. For a very long time in the church, when people are baptized, they're asked some form of this question: do you turn from sin and renounce evil and its power in the world, and to you turn to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?

In the ancient church, baptismal candidates would begin facing the west, and the setting sun and gathering darkness, for the first question, renouncing evil and its power in the world, and they would then literally turn around to face the east and the rising sun and gathering light, pledging their trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

So in a very real sense, then, to repent means to turn - to turn from the way you're going, and to turn to the way of God.

I don't mean to be a downer, my friend, but the truth is that you and I are both dying. We are both one day closer to our deaths than we were at this time yesterday.

But that truth need not cause us to despair. There's an old song that tells a story of a man who learns that he is dying, and his friend says, "What do you do when you get that kind of news?" And he said, "I loved deeper, and I spoke sweeter, and I gave the forgiveness I'd been denying, and someday, I hope you get the chance to live like you were dying."

Perhaps what Jesus was pointing out about the need for repentance was the sad fact that the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices and those who had perished at the tower of Siloam had delayed seeking and offering forgiveness, and now they would not get the chance. Perhaps those who had died suddenly had spoken bitter words that morning, and now wouldn't have a chance to take them back. Perhaps they had not loved as deeply as they could have when they had the chance, and now for them, it was suddenly too late. They had lost the opportunity to live like they were dying.

Remember, this whole conversation is taking place while Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. Time is

growing short. Jesus tells a parable about a fig tree that's yet to produce to illustrate that the time for producing fruit is now. The fox is on the prowl, and as much as Jesus longs to gather us under wing and protect us, evil and calamity will still reign for a season. Who knows what tomorrow will bring? We go to the doctor. We take our medicine. We wear our seatbelts. But time is growing shorter by the day, and today is the day to start living like you were dying.

So what in your life needs to be turned, my friend? What is it in your life that is keeping you from loving deeper, speaking sweeter, and seeking and offering the forgiveness that you've been denying? What needs to be turned from sin and darkness, and reoriented back toward the light of God's love made known to us in Jesus Christ. If not now, then when? The gardener won't wait forever. The fox is on the prowl. Jerusalem is just up ahead.

In this season of Lent, and indeed, for all the days of our lives, may we find the courage to live like we know we're dying, to the glory of God.

Amen.