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Lent 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Repent is Not a Four Letter Word”

Text: Luke 13:1-9; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Ezekiel 33:7-20

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

It was a sudden and unfair tragedy. They weren't hurting anyone; in fact, they were doing what was proper and right - offering sacrifices - when Pilate's henchmen came in and cut them down in cold blood. They slaughtered them, so that their blood was mixed with the blood of their sacrifices. It was awful; a sad day for all good Jews.

And so they came to Jesus and told Him. Perhaps they wanted to know why. Perhaps they wanted Jesus to denounce Pilate and this Roman brutality. Perhaps they wanted Jesus to cry out, *“How long, O Lord? Hear the cries of your people and destroy those evil Romans!”* But above all, they wanted sympathy. To know that God was on their side. Affirmation that they were right, and Pilate and the Romans wrong.

But Jesus does not respond as expected. Instead, He tells them: ***“Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”*** It is a marvel that He wasn't attacked on the spot! *For after all that we Jews have suffered, how dare you, Jesus! How dare you inflict more wounds on us by your criticism! By telling us to repent! What about Pilate, huh? Tell him to repent!*

[Jesus:] *Oh, you want me to condemn Pilate, but I am not talking to Pilate. He is not here. I am talking to you. Evil is also at work in you that will destroy you, Pilate or no Pilate. And so you must repent, or you will likewise perish. For you tell me of Pilate, but what about the tower in Siloam that fell? Were they worse sinners than you? Is Pilate a worse sinner than you? Were those slaughtered worse sinners than you? Do you think you are innocent? **No, repent, lest you likewise perish.***

This is a hard Word of God - not just for those people then, but for us today. For imagine speaking those words today. Imagine if after 9-11, Billy Graham had stood up in the National Cathedral and said to the President, and all gathered there that day, and a national television audience: ***Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.*** He would have been brutally attacked! An unrelenting media and a hurting public crying out: *How dare you! After all that we have suffered, telling us to*

repent! What about the terrorists? Tell them to repent!

But I am not talking to the terrorists. They are not here. I am talking to you. For you tell me of terrorists, but what of the earthquakes in Haiti and Chile, of the tsunami in Indonesia, or of hurricanes, typhoons, and wildfires? Are they to whom these things happen worse sinners than you? Do you think you are innocent? Are you so self-righteous that you think God is punishing them for their sin, while you are good enough to be spared? **No, repent, lest you likewise perish.**

To speak that way is a dangerous thing. Just ask Ezekiel, Jeremiah, or any of the prophets. Such talk makes it sound as if we deserve to have such suffering and tragedies befall us. But whether or not that is true, it's not the point Jesus is making here. Rather, He wants us to understand that we are fallen and sinful people, living in a fallen and sinful world, and that these fallen and sinful things happen to and affect us all. They happen to good people and bad people, to rich and poor, to young and old, and to people of all religions and nationalities. *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* (Romans 3:23). And all means all. And there is a far worse disaster awaiting those who fall short of the glory of God. An eternal disaster.

And so we are not to look to ourselves or to others for an answer or a reason - who is a worse sinner or not. Jesus is clear: this is not the answer. If we do so, we will only be fooling and deceiving ourselves. *Rather, we are to turn to Jesus - to God our Saviour - and repent and take refuge in Him.* For only He can deliver us not only from this fallen and sinful world, but from the fallenness and sinfulness that is at work in each of us.

Jesus then gives us a picture of that as well, in the parable of the fruitless fig tree. That is what sinners, those who fall short of the glory of God, look like. It is not that we don't have enough fruit - it's that, on our own, we have no fruit. None. And what we deserve is to be dug up or cut down. But there is One who has come to have mercy on us. That we be let alone (or literally: *forgiven*) for our unfruitfulness, and be given extra care, that we might live and bear fruit.

And notice, this is all despite the tree. It's not that the tree shows promise, or used to be good, or anything in the tree itself. It is all apart from the tree, or *outside* the tree - purely from the grace and mercy of its vinedresser, who is now its Saviour.

This care Jesus now provides for you and me. Digging around in our lives, that He might feed us with His manure. *And what is His manure?* It is He Himself, His body and blood. For Jesus was the One thrown out with the trash; thrown out and hung on the cross on the garbage heap named Golgotha. But the fruit of the tree of the cross now given to us is the food and drink we need to produce the fruits of faith; to be no longer unfruitful trees, but trees transformed by the love and forgiveness of

our Saviour.

And so repentance is not a bad thing, but a good thing. It is the language of the Christian, which acknowledges our sin, acknowledges the love and mercy of God, and acknowledges that He is our only refuge and strength in times of trouble. For to repent is to turn away from ourselves, what we see, what we feel, and what we want, and to turn to our Saviour for what is true, and for what we need. It is to die to ourselves, and find our life in Him. It is to not put our trust in the people and things of this world that crumble and fall and fail us, but to put our trust in the One that cannot fail.

And so when disasters strike, and we are shaken and feel vulnerable, it is a reminder to us that perhaps we have been trusting the wrong things. That not they, but we, need to repent. And that we are not above and beyond repenting, for, as St. Paul reminded us, look at the people of Israel and all the wonders they witnessed and all the good they had been given. Yet what happened to them? They grumbled and complained, they fell into idolatry and sexual immorality, and put God to the test. Be careful, Paul says. ***Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.*** The allure of sin is strong.

But we have an advantage, for unlike the people of Israel, we have not been ***baptized into Moses***, but ***baptized into Christ!*** Isn't that an interesting phrase Paul uses there, to be *baptized into Moses*. I think by it he *means* to grab our attention, and make us realize that while Moses' exodus was great, Christ's is even greater. That through His death and resurrection, Christ has delivered us from our slavery to sin and given us the Promised Land of heaven. And that as we travel along the way, He feeds us with the bread of His own body, gives us the drink of His own blood, and sustains us with His forgiveness. And that baptized into Christ, this is true whether things are going smoothly, or when our world is rocked.

For when things are going well, it is a gift from our gracious Lord's hand. And when things are not going so well, our Lord is with us through it. But the constant there is not us or the things that happen to us, but the goodness of the Lord. To know that *whether we live or die, we are the Lord's* (Romans 14:8).

And so we repent. For to repent is to turn to the Lord, to be the Lord's, to look to the Lord, to rely on the Lord, to expect good from the Lord. It is the very opposite of grumbling and complaining, *for to repent is the ultimate praise*. For when we repent, we confess the One who had promised to forgive, and who sealed that promise in His own blood. And so we can say how great God is 'til we're blue in the face - but to both speak and live a life of repentance and forgiveness is to truly praise His name. For that is how He wants to be known: as the God of the cross. The God of forgiveness. The God who got down on His hands and knees with us in

our dirt, that we might stand with Him in His glory.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.