

3 March 2013
Lent 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A Very Gracious Gardener”

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

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

This Lenten season is a time of self-examination. A time to look a little deeper and think a little longer about your Christian life. How has it been with you? How are your prayers? How is your time in God’s Word? Do you live a Christian life or, honestly, a life that is sometimes Christian and sometimes something else?

Lent is a time to examine your faith. Do you trust God - *really*? That all that He has sent you in your life is for your good? And consider your love: do you love your neighbor - not just when it’s easy but even when it’s hard? Those you like and those you don’t? Or, do I really trust me and what I think and do and desire, and really love *myself* first?

And have you thanked God for the blessings He’s given to you? Your parents, your job, your home, your school. What about those people and things you may not particularly regard as blessings - the crosses He has given you to bear, which are sometimes very heavy and very hard?

If you’re like me, those three paragraphs, those three sets of questions I just asked are strike one, strike two, and strike three. I have not been the Christian I should be, in those ways and many more. I have many reasons to repent.

Which is what our readings for today are all about: *repentance*. Those were hard readings, weren’t they? Hard to say *Thanks be to God!* after hearing them. Following this theme, then, of self-examination, they would have you ask yourself this day: *how’s your repentance been?* Do you repent because you are sorry for your sin? Or just because you didn’t get away with it? Do you repent for your sinful thoughts and desires, those sins no one else knows about? Do you repent with the hope of conquering sin? Of rooting it out of your life? Of resisting that temptation when it comes upon you again? Or is your repentance with little thought about what comes next? How often I fail here, too.

But though difficult, it is important, it is necessary to ask these questions of yourself, to look a little deeper and think a little longer, that we may recognize just how long

and deep the roots of sin are in us.

And so the readings today convict even our repentance: it is not what it should be. For if we repent and then return to our sin - *not good enough!* Ezekiel says. Not good enough. And are we like the people of Israel in the wilderness? Paul says they were baptized and fed by God, like us, yet look at their life - idolatry, sexual immorality, testing God, and grumbling against God - *not good enough!* (Notice how Paul includes testing God and grumbling against God with idolatry and sexual immorality! Do we think that way?) And what then about comparing ourselves to others, as Jesus talks about today? If we look around and make judgments about who's a bigger sinner than me, what does that do to my repentance? *Not good enough!*

So when it comes to looking for good fruits on you, what will be found? What will be said?

That's difficult. That's hard; those are hard words. **But there's hope.** For if Lent is about self-examination and taking a good, long, hard, and honest look at ourselves, *even more* is it about the hope that we have, the Saviour that we have, who has come to rescue us. That our hope is not in ourselves, in our efforts, on our achievements, on how well we can change ourselves - our hope is in the light of our Saviour's forgiveness and His light which shines into our dark and not-good-enough lives. To raise and resurrect us who are dead and fruitless in our trespasses and sins to a new life in Him.

There's hope. For we're not alone in this fight, in this struggle against sin. If we were, it would have been over long ago. It would have been over in the garden, with Adam and his bride alone, apart, hiding, in fear, and soon to die, and that would have been the end of this tragic story.

But there's hope, for we have a vinedresser - a gardener, let's call Him - who intervenes for us. *No, please, don't chop it down; don't chop them down. Let me help. Let me work. Let me tend them and feed them and care for them. Let me pour my sweat and blood into them. Let me love them.*

And there's hope because that's exactly what our Lord Jesus has done for you. He loves *all* His trees - those who produce lots of fruit, little fruit, or no fruit. In fact (notice!), those who produce no fruit He provides *extra* attention to, that they might be fruitful and produce the fruits of faith; the fruits of good works and love. For He wants no one to be chopped down. No one to perish.

So much so that He became the tree chopped down in our place. Jesus died, so that we might have a resurrection. For so God had promised. For before, when the

world was filled with evil, God destroyed the world, saving the only good and fruitful tree - only Noah and his family. But now, instead of destroying the world, the Father sent His Son to drown in the depth of our sin in our place. The only good and fruitful tree was chopped down, to save the world by the forgiveness of sin; to save us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. That we might not just die, but **die with Him**. And if you die with Him, then rise to a new life with Him.

For that is what the gardener actually said. Our English translations have him saying: **Sir, let it alone**; but literally, that could also be translated as: *Sir, forgive it*. Or perhaps we could say: *Father, forgive them*.

And so now, in this time, the gardener - our Saviour - is working. Watering us with the waters of Holy Baptism, wielding the axe of the Law not to chop us down but to prune us that we bear more fruit, and feeding us with His own Body and Blood, that this food grow up into us and we into it. For truly, that is the manure given to us to make us good trees. (Yes, I just called the Body and Blood of Christ *manure*! But in this regard:) for was not the Body and Blood of Christ thrown out with the trash and hung on the cross on the garbage heap called Golgotha? Yet what the powers of the world considered trash and dung, what was worth nothing in their eyes, was the greatest treasure on earth - the very Son of God, who now gives us Himself and His forgiveness, that we be trees transformed by His love and life.

So there's hope, for as St. Paul said, **God is faithful**. Faithful, for He keeps all His promises to you. Faithful, for as He warns us that **let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall** - He is here for those who are fallen and those who fall to raise us up again in the forgiveness of our sins.

And so with that promise, we **repent** - imperfect as our repentance may be! - 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. To repent is the very opposite of grumbling and complaining, *for to repent is the ultimate praise*. For when we repent, we not only confess who we are, but we confess the One who has no sin, has promised to forgive, and who sealed that promise in His own blood.

And with that forgiveness we **love** - imperfect as that love may be! - for to love our neighbor is to love the Lord, to be the Lord's, to rely on the Lord, to expect good from the Lord. It is to trust our Lord, who works through imperfect men and women like us and brings to completion all of our works imperfectly done.

And with that love we also **forgive**. For evil perfectly done and for good imperfectly done. For so Christ prayed and did for us when we were fruitless, dead trees. *Father, forgive them*. For 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 forgiveness. As the God of the cross where that forgiveness was won.

For the God who first created us out of dirt, then got down on His hands and knees with us in our dirt, died for us who are dirt, and was finally buried in that dirt, did so that we who are dirt - *remember that dirt you are, and to dirt you will return* - that we who are dirt might stand with Him in His glory.

For that is why the gardener came, to give you not a dead faith, but a living, growing, fruiting faith. And it is why He is working in you even now, digging, feeding, caring, forgiving. That what you lack He may provide, and what others need you may provide. And if it seems too much for you (which sometimes it does for all of us!), too many people pulling on your branches, too many hands plucking your fruit, too many who keep coming back, looking for more - remember: *you're not alone*. The Lord who produced that fruit in you will continue to care for you and feed you and give you all you need. For your fruits are really His fruits, after all, for the life of the world.

So don't despair; don't give up! Those were hard readings today, convicting. But you have a very gracious gardener! Repent and come and receive the food and love, the care and forgiveness, of that gardener, your Saviour. And rejoice that you have such a Saviour. Rejoice in His love for you. Rejoice that God has bestowed on us such grace (LSB #824).

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.