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Lent 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Tough Times. Tough Words. A Faithful God”  
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.

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 women who came to Jerusalem as wives left as widows, and children as orphans.

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. Jesus sounds so cold and callous. For imagine speaking those words today. After Paris, after San Bernadino. ***Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.*** We would be brutally attacked! An unrelenting media and an indignant public crying out: *How dare you! After all that we have suffered, telling us to repent! What about the terrorists? Are you one of them? Tell them to repent!*

How would Jesus have responded? 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 tornados in the Midwest, the earthquakes in Taiwan, the tsunami in the Philippines, or hurricanes or wildfires or floods? 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. Just ask those who have been taken to task for speaking the truth by our politically correct culture. 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, the point He is making is that 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). If you're afflicted it doesn't mean you're worse, and if you're not it doesn't mean you're better. All means all. So what happens to you when they do happen? When either suddenly or slowly, from old age or tragedy, your life is taken? There is a far worse disaster awaiting those who fall short of the glory of God. An eternal one.

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. We like to do that. We like to be the judge and think we got it all figured out. And when we're involved, we usually come out on top when we do. But such comparisons are not reliable, and often times - maybe always - not true. So Jesus is clear: this is not the answer. To think that way is only fooling and deceiving ourselves. *Rather, in times like this, 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, us, 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 is the picture of the care Jesus 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. His blood poured out for us there. But the fruit of His tree - 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.

So when faced with tragedy, with our own mortality, with fearsome things in the world and in our lives, or just the annoyances and challenges that come everyday that cause us to judge and criticize or feel sorry for ourselves . . . the best thing to do is to turn to the One who is our refuge at all such times . . . and repent. For to repent is to take refuge not in ourselves, but in Him. It is to acknowledge not only our sin, it is to turn away from ourselves, from our strength, and from our wisdom and however we think things should be, and trust in the love and mercy of God, who has promised to help and be our strength in times of trouble and to find our life and assurance in Him. It is to not put our trust in the people and things of this world that - sooner or later - all crumble and fall and let us down, but to put our trust in the One who never will.

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, and so it is we who need to repent. To turn again to our true hope and confidence. To heed again those words we heard from St. Paul: ***Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.*** And it's not really a question of if, but when.

So when we fall - whether knocked down by the sin of others, by the sin and tragedy present in creation, or felled by the sin within - we not only turn to the Lord in repentance, but remember that we are baptized. And not ***baptized into Moses***, like Paul wrote of Israel, but ***baptized into Christ!*** Baptized into the One greater than Moses, the One with a greater exodus. For Moses taught but could not fulfill. Moses led but could not save. But through His death and resurrection, Christ has delivered us from our slavery not to Egypt but to sin, and given us the promise not just of a long earthly life but an eternal one. That life given in baptism, fed by the bread of His own Body, satisfied with the drink of His own Blood, and sustained with His forgiveness. And 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* - whether Pilate spills our blood or not, whether we are caught in the next building collapse or 9-11, whether natural disasters and disease strike, whether sorrow or joy or challenge is our bread this day, to know that *whether we live or die, we are the Lord's* (Romans 14:8).

And so we repent. We 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 has 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. And that's a God worth trusting.

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