

Sermon – The Third Sunday in Lent – 03.23.2025

Fr. John Warfel

Let your imagination take you to the temple in Jerusalem
It's the early 1st century, the time of Jesus' earthly ministry

The Temple is busting with money changers and vendors
selling all sorts of animals for sacrifice
As you walk through the hustle and bustle,
You watch as people barter for the animals
Doves are cheap, but unblemished lambs are on the pricey side

Large crowds of Galilean Jews swarm the money tables/ caged animals
They've come to offer sacrifice
Sin offerings, offerings of thanksgiving
Animal sacrifices prescribed by the Torah
You watch the priests plunge large knives into the animals,
Following the Holiness Code to the letter

Then suddenly, in the middle of all this solemn ritual
Pilate's soldiers storm the Temple
And they begin to stab the Jews with their swords,
Indiscriminately, ruthlessly, mercilessly
Many flee but most of the Galilean Jews drop to the floor
And they lie there, bleeding to death

You watch in horror as the blood of human corpses-
Mingles with the blood from animal carcasses-
Flowing into a gruesome pool...
You have just imagined the scene for the opening of today's gospel

Some people come to Jesus and relate this grisly event
He listens to them and then asks them:
Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way-
They were worse sinners than all other Galileans?

Or how about the 18 who were killed
when the Tower of Siloam fell on them
Were they worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?

Jesus asks these questions because he knows exactly what they think
And who can blame them
The Hebrew Scriptures are full of stories describing a wrathful God-
Punishing sinners with sudden or violent death-
With battle defeats, barrenness, blindness and so on

Divine retribution,
The only reasonable conclusion
These Galileans must have committed some notorious sin
Or God would have not allowed it to happen

But as 21st Century Christians, we know better, or at least we should
God does not punish the wicked with afflictions
And reward the righteous with blessings
It simple doesn't work that way
If it did, then the righteous would enjoy happy, idyllic lives,
While the wicked would suffer continuous adversity
Our own life experience tells us that this just isn't so.

Instead, there is a randomness in all human experience
It's not an issue of fairness or equality
It doesn't mean that God is fickle or capricious
Things just happen

Whether things go right or wrong,
God is not passing judgment on us
God's judgment happens only once, once for all:
At the end of time (as we know it) or as we say in the creed:
He will come again in glory to judge both the living and the dead. Period

But what about the answer Jesus gives his listeners
Unless you repent you will all perish as they did

Is Jesus saying that if we repent
We'll be shielded from the randomness of violent death?

No, he says that unless we repent
We will all perish like the Galileans
Not in a pool of blood
But like the Galileans,
We'll all die without experiencing repentance
Now I know repentance is a loaded word
Street corner preachers use it to frighten and convert
Taking on God's role as Judge of the living and the dead.
But the word repentance doesn't mean self-mortification.
The Greek word we translate as repentance is **metanoia**
Which means **change or transformation**

Not self-chastisement, but **changing our mind**
Coming to a new way of thinking
Turning **to** the Lord,
Much the same way Moses **turns** to the burning bush:
With wonder and awe, listening to the voice of God
A voice that says:
Moses I have something that I want you to do for me

Repentance means turning away from our own egos,
From our own wills and agendas,
Turning from our own schemes for happiness
And redirecting ourselves towards the will of God, the **Flow of God**

Regardless of what some of preach
Repentance is not a one shot deal – a single moment of decision
It's not a precise moment in time when we say prescribed words:
Jesus I repent of all my sins; come into my heart

Repentance is an ongoing process of the Christian life
It's what we do every Sunday
It's what we just did at the beginning of the Eucharist this morning

We confessed our sins,
And now we focus on the Real Presence of Christ
In the consecrated bread and wine

And yet, after we leave this safe holy place,
We are bound to be distracted.
Throughout our lives we will continuously be distracted-
By all the things that compete for our love and attention

And yes, it's painful to turn away from things that clearly-
choke the Flow between God and us
It's very painful to let these things die in us.
But there is great urgency here.

Not because a Tower might fall on us
but because the more we turn away from God
The harder it is to turn back
The more we listen to the distraction of the world's voice-
And our own voice...the harder it is to hear God's voice

But keep heart and remember two things:
First, God wants to be in relationship with us
God wants us to come to a new understanding of God
And a new understanding of our selves

The Spirit of God **nudges** us, **pushes** us, **leads** us to repentance
For most of its history, the Church has set aside Lent-
As a time to respond to the Spirit
This Holy Spirit that calls us back to God

Second, God is patient with us
As the psalmist says:
*God is full of compassion and mercy,
Slow to anger and of great kindness*
When we don't bear fruit,
Jesus convinces the owner of the orchard not to chop us down

Wait another year, he says
I'll fertilize the tree. Don't chop it down yet
Let me see what I can do with it

Well, I don't know about you fig tress
But this fig tree has had many fruitless seasons
And thanks be to God that regardless of what we do or don't do,
God keeps calling us, prompting us, moving us-
to see things as God sees them

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