

March 12, 2017 – 2nd Sunday of Lent
Faith Mennonite Church
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The time and place for repentance
Luke 13:1-9, 31-35

During this season of Lent, the Gospel of Luke invites us to follow Jesus' journey on foot from the region of Galilee, in the northern part of Palestine, toward Jerusalem, the Holy City. Luke records Jesus' departure for Jerusalem in chapter 9, just after the account of the transfiguration: "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem" (51). That sounds fairly sanguine, almost hiding the fact that "to be taken up" would be a torturous, painful experience. But Luke does not hide the conflict that will lead to Jesus' death. Here in chapter 13 (and our reading only gives us the bookends), Jesus' interaction with the crowds and the religious leaders becomes a bit testy.

The Jesus we encounter in today's reading sounds a bit like his predecessor John the Baptist. Jesus' voice has a decisive, cutting ring as he calls the crowds and later the leaders to repentance. This tone, this Jesus, may be off-putting to some of us. We like the gentle, inclusive Jesus who heals, who protects women, turns a group of fishermen into a band of disciples, and who calls the children to his side. But Jesus was not like our radio stations – "all classic rock all the time" (or news, or classical, or indie, or R&B)—our own personal favorite. The Gospels show Jesus, in his human and divine nature, to experiencing and expressing a range of emotions: tenderness, anger, compassion, frustration, patience and impatience, grief, sadness, intensity and calm. To know and to follow Jesus, to worship God, to be led by God's Spirit, asks us to accept and be confronted by this broad, untamed, character that is God.

This is the work of Lent, to listen to the stark voice of Jesus as he confronts the powers of evil and as he moves toward the ultimate sacrifice, offering up his very life. As the tension is rising around Jesus, we find a range of emotions in today's passage: first an insistent call to repentance, then a refreshing parable of hope, followed by a contentious exchange with religious leaders that resolves into an image of lament and compassion. Stepping back, we can see these as a tryptic of repentance.

But let's start with that word repentance...repent. What does it mean? (ask for definition). How does it make you feel when you hear it? (reactions) Repentance refers to a transformation, a reordering of one's life, a turning from a path that is destructive or self-centered toward a path of wholeness that is open to the work of God. This all sounds quite positive, don't you think? Yet, so many of us, quite often, resist this invitation. We get caught up in simple comforts, or self-protection and rationalization. That's what we find in the first portion of our reading. People tell Jesus about something dreadful that has happened to a group of Galileans who were in Jerusalem to offer sacrifices. The Roman governor Pilate evidently ordered soldiers to kill them—right there in the temple in the midst of their sacrifices.

Jesus reads their minds. And we know how the thinking goes. When there's a tragedy, we humans almost always jump to the *why* questions. In seeking meaning or a reason, we are prone to blame. Sometimes we point to the victim: did they do something wrong? Sometimes we settle for a scapegoat: radical Islamists are the enemy. But Jesus doesn't go there. Instead he says, "Stop, repent, make sure that you're ready for whatever happens."

We live in a wonderfully made, yet fragile creation. Accidents in nature and human-caused accidents happen. We can't avoid them all. Some of us will meet our end quickly, as happened to our dear friend Mike Schrock and some others of our members or friends. Others will be visited by cancer or long-term disability. We know that there are measures we can take to protect from illness, such as exercise, healthy eating, and reducing stress. And there are safety precautions we can take like wearing seatbelts, and not driving when we're drowsy, keeping fire alarms in our homes. Yet none of us is guaranteed a long life, and certainly not immortality. Jesus, says, "Be ready. Live in a way that you won't have regrets...and so that the people you leave behind aren't left with wounds." Repentance isn't a scary thing; it is a gift. It is an invitation to live fully.

Here Luke calls to mind a parable that Jesus told about a fig tree. A fig tree with a problem. The owner had waited the expected time for it to begin giving fruit, but it wasn't doing so. Naturally, the owner instructs the gardener to cut it down and make way for another. But the gardener isn't ready to give up on this tree. She asks for another year, to aerate and fertilize the tree, hoping that will bring forth fruit. To fully appreciate this parable, we need to realize that in the ancient world, figs symbolized "abundance and initiation."¹ Repentance requires initiation and it promises abundance. But there's more here. We're not left on our own in this undertaking. We have gardeners, encouragers, one another in this spiritual family, to whom we can turn when we realize we need to reorient our lives. Two weeks ago, Leslie shared with us that she was beginning weight-watchers. And as soon as the service was over, several people came to tell her that they, too, are attending weight-watchers. She, and they, are not alone in their turning.

This week I read an inspiring story from the Maple City Health Center in Goshen, Indiana. The center is located in a low-income neighborhood and works to create a community of health not just individual care. Despite its location and the fact that it stores lots of medications, the center had never experienced break-ins. But several years ago, when they were doing some building expansion, they suffered a series of break-ins during several weeks. They weren't highly destructive nor were things of value taken; mostly it seemed that someone was playing around.

Almost as quickly as the break-ins began, they ended for a couple months. Then, just as the construction was nearing completion, the break-ins began again and this time a valuable metal door was ruined. The director decided to set up a security system and a couple nights later the police apprehended a 17-year-old neighbor boy, Tony, who came to the center for healthcare. His parents had been aware of his nighttime roaming and had set up an alarm system that let them know when he was leaving his room at night. After his behavior moderated, they disarmed the alarm. It was then that the break-ins began again.

One of the board members of the health center, Dan, had a son who had been in trouble with the law as a teenager. Dan asked the board not to turn the youth over to the legal system, and they gave him their blessing to work with the prosecutor. An arrangement was made for Tony to do two hours of community service each week—at the health center. At first, he went about his jobs half-heartedly, but then one week he came to do his work on an afternoon when some community members were preparing for a weekly potluck meal. A member noticed him and invited him to the meal. After leaving for a moment, he came back with some banana bread to add to the food table. "From then on, Tony did his community service on Wednesday afternoon, and he stayed for the shared meal. His disposition changed from sullen to sunny and he began to do his chores wholeheartedly." When his period of required service ended, he kept coming to volunteer and to eat with the group. Before long he announced that he had made the honor roll. He finished high school on time, enrolled in community college and now has a job in the community.² With a supportive community, Tony experienced repentance that led to initiation and abundance.

In the final portion of the reading, the Pharisees, who often were at odds with Jesus, seem to be worried about his welfare. They warned him that Herod, the king who had killed John the Baptist, now had sights on Jesus. But Jesus would not be deterred. He intended to continue his ministry of healing and casting out demons and going to Jerusalem, to the center of political and religious power. His defiance, however, was tempered by a tenderness and love toward this city. "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (34) This image of a hen with her chicks under his wings is one of protection, but we also hear an echo from the very first chapter of the Bible, in the account of creation. There the Spirit/breath of God broods over the face of the watery void. It was this brooding, this movement of breath that birthed the creation. Thus, we complete the picture of repentance as an invitation to new birth, to being recreated. And God says "It is good!"

Where is the place and when is the time of repentance? Here and now, among friends, surrounded by the brooding wings of the Spirit!

¹ www.wiz.com/issue34/html/article5.html

² Don Yost and the staff of Maple City Health Care Center, "Caring for enspirited bodies/embodied spirits," *Vision: A Journal for Church Theology – Body*, Fall 2016, Vol 17, No 2, 71-79