

Repent or Perish (20Mar22)
Luke 13:1-9; Isaiah 55:1-9

A few of you might recall Peter Fribley, whom I knew in another time and place, who was once described to me as having the most amazing eyebrows in our synod. He would frequently remark about the New York Times obituaries. His line was, "You don't read to see who died. You read to see who lived."

Incidentally, I also think about Peter Fribley every time we use this Service of the Word liturgy. When ELW came out, he was infuriated at the words in the prayer we'll do next that didn't square with his Presbyterian theology, or his background as an army chaplain then witnessing the Iraq War, that God would bring beauty out of chaos. He insisted it was order that God could bring from chaos.

Anyway, not reading to see who died but who lived may be analogous to what Jesus is saying in this Gospel reading.

I know, it can seem strangely brutal that he says, "Repent or die," "Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."

Clearly, he's not saying repentance will spare you from death. At the least, we know we're going to die. His point is that worse things don't happen to worse sinners. God isn't tipping towers on rotten people. Victims of violence didn't have it coming. Jesus doesn't believe in divine punishment. And he should know!

Pat Robertson infamously regularly claims he knows otherwise, attributing disasters to the LGBTQ community or abortion or God's hidden operations through violence or because people are Brown and Black, or most anything else other than being willing to accept some of the blame himself.

Jesus shuts this out entirely. Even if we'd typically claim that bad things aren't punishment from God, as if God were lurking to smite, catching

us misbehaving, we nevertheless also wonder how to escape calamity and avoid death, in personal habits or health care plans or military spending. When tragedy strikes, violently or accidentally, we wonder: why? Why did it happen? Why did God let this occur? Even, what did I do to deserve having a bad day?

Jesus doesn't really answer, except to say Tragedy. Isn't. Punishment.

That may or may not feel like relief. You may still want to protest it's not fair, the most frequent upset in these days being that God is allowing Putin to get away with mayhem and carnage against innocent Ukraine.

But Jesus says God doesn't operate that way. God goes by grace. One writer phrased that we say there's no such thing as a free lunch, but God, in divine grace, says there is.* "If you don't have any money, come, eat what you want!" God declares (Isaiah 55:1). You can be a worthless, worn out fig tree, but God will keep pouring the fertilizer on you, keep you on life support, giving you another chance.

The Lord says, "My thoughts and my ways are not like yours," because our thoughts are about getting what you deserve, about punishment, always circling around tragedy and death.

God, though, is more interested in life than in death. Jesus will suffer, be cut down, and crushed, and bloodied. But even that tragedy is in service of life. So repentance, in finding our minds transformed, sees that preoccupation with death isn't worthwhile. Getting sucked in by the tragic, isn't God's perspective. Though we might imagine we're staving off the inevitable for a time, we eventually have to confront that "the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all," as it says in Ecclesiastes, "For no one can anticipate the time of disaster" (9:11-12a).

* <http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-c/lent3c/>

We're not left as existential nihilists to throw up hands and say, "well then what's the point?!" Rather, we have God's question in Isaiah: "Why waste your money on what really isn't food? Why work hard for something that doesn't satisfy?" To go chasing after answers that will never appear and frantically and frenetically thinking we can evade and avoid death does not satisfy. It's a waste, leaving us with buyer's remorse. Or, in Jesus' frame, liver's remorse. We get to the end and have failed really to live, focusing the obituary on who died rather than who lived.

It's not sufficient to boil this down to the little truism that "nobody on their deathbed ever said 'I wish I spent more time at the office'" but there's something to that. How do we spend our lives? Or what do we spend them on? If God is invested in you living, is it only being toward death, or is it for the sake of life?

Again with the obvious example, we can be sad and overwhelmed and shocked about Ukraine. We could waste time wishing that Putin would suffer consequences and repercussions, that "war criminals go straight to hell," as Ukraine's UN ambassador opined. Or we could let God renew our perspective and witness the beauty that can, indeed, come out of the chaos, the love of neighbor, the resistance for peace. We could focus on the death, or we could find ways to join in supporting life and relief and hope.

Again, I wouldn't typically condescend to equate Jesus with a meme on Facebook, but here we go. With a picture of gas prices, it said: "so today I stopped and filled up my car and I was thankful. Thankful that I have a car. Thankful I have money to buy gas. Thankful there are no war planes flying over me. Thankful that I will be eating soon. Thankful that all of my loved ones are safe and sound... Thankful that the air I breathe is not filled with smoke and gunpowder. Thankful that I will sleep in silence and wake to a beautiful day." Now, that could just turn to self-satisfaction or schadenfreude or even a gloating sort of patriotism.

But it could also be repentance, a change of perspective, a transformed mind that sees life instead of death.

And even when we do see death, when we can't ignore its reality, when tragedy really is inescapable and diminishing of life, still we are reoriented by baptism, that you have already died with Jesus by baptism into death, so that with him you may walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4).

