

## Isaiah 55:1-9

Ho, everyone who thirsts,  
come to the waters;  
and you that have no money,  
come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk  
without money and without price.

<sup>2</sup>Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,  
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,  
and delight yourselves in rich food.

<sup>3</sup>Incline your ear, and come to me;  
listen, so that you may live.

I will make with you an everlasting covenant,  
my steadfast, sure love for David.

<sup>4</sup>See, I made him a witness to the peoples,  
a leader and commander for the peoples.

<sup>5</sup>See, you shall call nations that you do not know,  
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,  
because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel,  
for he has glorified you.

<sup>6</sup>Seek the LORD while he may be found,  
call upon him while he is near;

<sup>7</sup>let the wicked forsake their way,  
and the unrighteous their thoughts;  
let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them,  
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

<sup>8</sup>For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.

<sup>9</sup>For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

## Repent or Perish

**13** At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup>He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? <sup>3</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. <sup>4</sup>Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

## The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree

<sup>6</sup>Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. <sup>7</sup>So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' <sup>8</sup>He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. <sup>9</sup>If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

## **Wasting the Soil**

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**Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9**

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The news of the day is brutal. It often is. Clearly, some were concerned with what they were hearing about Pilate and his knack for using brutal punishments to intimidate his subjects. Pilate had presumably taken the blood of these dead Galileans and used it for a ritual sacrifice. They were also concerned about a falling tower that crushed 18 people under its weight. Who were these people and what was their crime? Were they being punished for their sin, singled out by God to be the victims of heinous acts of political rage, or accidents of karmic consequence? Which was worse? And curious minds want to know: Does God use divine power in this way? They wanted an answer, and they wanted Jesus to give it to them. They'd been taught to keep the law, do good deeds, go to church, and call their mother at least once a week. If things like this could happen to just anyone, what's the point of doing what we are supposed to do?

I dare say we read the news and have similar questions enter our minds. Jesus, tell us, are bad people going to get what they deserve in this life? And why is it that it always seems as though good people get caught in the crossfire? By all means, give us the formula for staying safe. That's what we really want to know, isn't it? And we predicate our safety on things that don't really protect us the way we imagine they should. We try to come up with the lists of things that are good for us, and we check the boxes of those that seem to matter the most. Maybe it's being part of a faith community, or maybe it's eating healthy, or going to the gym, or living a certain way, or avoiding dangerous neighborhoods. Maybe it's double-locking the door or flipping on the security system. Maybe it's pointing our fingers at others and asking the question,

“If this tragedy could happen to them, doesn’t that mean they HAD to be worse sinners than all the others?”

I get it. I really, really do. As a matter of fact, the closer the situation is, the more questions we seem to come up with. For a few moments here, I’m going to get personal. Many of you know already that my brother-in-law was diagnosed recently as having multiple tumors - one by his brain, several smaller ones along his spine, and another, unrelated, in his lung. He received this information the very weekend he turned 45. And as any of you know who have gone through a scary “wait and see” kind of experience with a serious health concern, at first you imagine the very worst of the worst. What exactly would tomorrow bring? I can’t even imagine what he was going through because it seemed “enough” just to be his family members responding in concern.

And even when I can claim intellectually that nothing he did caused it to happen, the same feelings crop up. How could God let this happen to a church-going, right-living, Bible-following, father of 3? Could something really have gone wrong with his life plan that raised God’s anger? And if something could go wrong with Steve’s life plan, then we could only imagine the doom facing our family given our reputation as the wayward progressives who are thought to play fast and loose with the Bible, and are known to drink beer and use bad language at family gatherings. Why Steve? Why not us? Why does it seem so much tragedy has landed on their side of the family and not ours? Answer us, Jesus. Give us some thought that life in this world isn’t as capricious as it seems to be.

Well, the news we have received since that initial weekend in the hospital has been increasingly positive. None of the tumors were found to be cancerous. And this week, his first surgery went very well – it took less time on the operating table than expected, and he’s now

home recovering for a couple weeks before the follow up to repair the hole in his skull. The sense of relief that comes with that news is tremendous. The pictures of his smiling face have been awesome to see. A LOT of people were praying for him – you all included – and I thank you for your love and concern poured out for our family in texts, and prayers, and your many kind words. Being part of a loving faith community when a health crisis happens can be such a source of strength and wisdom for the journey. And I HAVE to believe that the strength and wisdom is held deeply and faithfully so that in those times when the outcomes are more “oh no” than “Thanks be to God,” that you would be there for us sharing those moments as well.

Now, back to the text. Even as the crowds are wringing their hands over what’s happened, Jesus refuses to give us the answers we are hoping for. He eludes the direct question – “So, were the Galileans who were dishonored in death by Pilate’s sacrifice more sinful, or not?” He doesn’t say. But he says something even more disturbing – unless you all repent, you will perish as they did. And you will “perish just as they did” means what exactly? He says it about both circumstances – the one seeming like some sort of mafia-esque retribution, and the one that seemed like a total accident. Repent – or perish.

Of course we see that as some sort of call to obedience. It’s in our nature to do so. Something bad happens and we are immediately off to the races with our comparisons – are we as bad as that, or do we see ourselves as better than that? Have we lived good enough lives? Will we perish under some tragic circumstance if we don’t behave? If perish just means die – then repent or not – none of us are getting out of this alive, so....

What does it mean to repent, or else? New Testament professor Matt Skinner gives some insight on a website designed for “working preachers” who are trying to make sense of these difficult texts. He says, *“Life’s fragility gives it urgency. Jesus turns attention away from*

*disasters, victims, and "why?" questions to address those of us who thus far have survived the hazards of the universe and human society. We should not mistake our good fortune as evidence of God's special blessing.*

*Jesus wants to talk about repentance. The need for repentance is a universal condition, shared by random victims and finger-crossing survivors. When Jesus says, twice, "unless you repent you will all perish" like the others did, he does not promise that the godless will be struck by an asteroid. He refers to death in an eschatological sense, a destruction of one's soul (compare Luke 9:24; Luke 17:33). He emphasizes the suddenness with which this death comes. Just as Pilate's and the tower's victims did not enjoy the luxury of choosing the time of their demise, likewise the unrepentant will suddenly find they have delayed too long and lost themselves." And further, Skinner goes on to say that this repentance isn't merely about "moral uprightness, expressions of regret, or a 180-degree turnaround." Rather, it's a changed mind, a new way of seeing things, perhaps I would say, repentance reminds us that even though life is unpredictable and many horrible things can happen in human circumstances – much can be said for living in the joy that happens if we turn our hearts and minds toward the ways in which graciousness and the love of God abounds.*

But we aren't done with this text simply with the admonition to repent or perish. Jesus teaches, as he often does with an illustration – this time talking about unproductive plants and the manure you have to put on them to get them to grow. If we get stuck in the dirt, caught up in tragedy, or merely wallow in difficult life circumstances to the point at which we can no longer bear fruit, then we need something, anything really to catch our attention so we don't get cut down without realizing it. It's pretty easy to go through life wasting the soil – complaining about the bad stuff, endlessly comparing ourselves to

others, and refusing to grow. It's the mindset, the one that tells us that bad things happen to bad people and good things happen to good people, or the opposite, that we have no influence on our outcomes whatsoever that gets us stuck. Somewhere in the paradox of living a human life – we ride out the pain of life's fragility. And when we do that with the urgency that it matters, then perhaps more of it will make sense to us.

Jesus offers us no guarantee that our lives will be pain-free. In fact, I think he is assuring us that the circumstances of life are going to hurt us in ways big and small. The best that we can do is make up our minds to choose life over death. Repentance, as studied New Testament scholars treat it, is that whole change of mind and heart – not just outlining our list of moral failures and asking God for forgiveness. And when we fail to see how life can be such an amazing journey even amid the uttered prayers of “oh no” and “Thanks be to God” then maybe Jesus is right, we are just wasting the soil. It's a harsh critique to be sure, but in times like ours, when the news cycles glom on to exactly the kind of stories that were being brought to Jesus, we need the encouragement to quiet our comparisons, quit worrying about who is being punished or rewarded, and live as changed people in a frightening world. To repent is to look through Jesus eyes at the world in all its beauty. That may be the only thing that renders the perishable imperishable. Amen.

## The Parable of Chuck's Fig

¶Then Chuck told his parable: A man rode a donkey... a donkey that did not want to be ridden. This donkey kicked him in a very painful yet comical place. It would have made money on America's Funniest home videos... This kick destroyed one of the figs, leaving it basically rubbish. This left the man with a singular fig. Figgy pudding will never be the same.



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