

4th SUNDAY IN ADVENT

December 18, 2016

St. Luke 13:1-9:

“The Word During Advent: Calls”

I. The Reality.

II. The Incidents.

III. The Call.

IV. The Parable.

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St. Luke 13:1-9

Dear Friends in Christ,

I read that when Harry Truman was thrust into the presidency at the death of FDR, Sam Rayburn, Speaker of the House of Representatives, gave him some fatherly advice. He said, "From here on out you're going to have lots of people around you. They'll try to put a wall around you and cut you off from any ideas but theirs. They'll tell you what a great man you are, Harry, but you and I both know you ain't."

And I came across an incident where a man asked a rabbi, "How come in the olden days God would show Himself to people, but today nobody ever sees God?" The rabbi said, "Because nowadays nobody can bow low enough."

It's called being humbled. Humbling oneself. Humility. Realistically recognizing who we are and what we are in the context of life. But, more importantly, it's recognizing who and what we are in the eyes of the Triune God.

We've been examining "The Word of Life During Advent." This Last Sunday we consider The Word of Life...

CALLS

I. The Reality.

And then I came across a Chinese proverb that says, "To forgive the unrepentant is to draw pictures on the water." Quite a thought, isn't it? While we must forgive our enemies, there's the reality that it usually doesn't make an impression - sink in - with them. It immediately goes away.

Most of you are familiar with the term "cheap grace." It refers to people who want the love and forgiveness of God without bearing the fruit of repentance. How about this: "Well, God forgives so I'll go ahead and live the life I want to live."

Then there's the reality that we all want cheap grace at times. We love to hear the words, "Jesus loves and forgives." However, we're not nearly as excited and comforted with this word of Jesus: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Matt. 16:24) That's the reality of God's Word, isn't it? It's the fact that we must take a long, hard look at ourselves. Well, that's the direction Jesus gives in our text:

II. The Incidents.

There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifice. And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way?Or those eighteen on whom the tower of Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?.... (vss. 1-5, portions)

I want you to hear what one of my seminary professors wrote, many years ago, concerning this text:

Pilate's massacre of the Galileans was brought to Jesus' attention presumably in the hope that He would be incensed at this outrage and take sides with the nationalists against the hated Romans.... (Jesus') reference to another calamity in Jerusalem (the tower of Siloam) emphasized that, although certain punishments may result from particular sins, every (adverse) incident should not occasion a why on our part. (Dr. Gerhard Aho)

But they do, don't they? We wonder why. We often connect dots where there are none; coming to conclusions that leave us standing on the outside making judgement calls. Well, there is a **call**, alright, and here's its direction . . .

III. The Call.

Regarding the words, "the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices" Jesus said, "...I tell you...unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." (vs. 4) And regarding the tower in Siloam that fell and killed eighteen people He said, "...unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." (vs. 5)

It's obvious, don't you think? We spend a lot of time looking at others, judging them, when, as you well know, we need to be looking at ourselves. That's the obvious. The words of God to Samuel are the words of God to us: "For the Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." (I Sam. 16:7) David writes in Psalm 139, "O Lord, you have searched me and known me...you discern my thoughts from afar." (Ps. 139:1,2b) Our moments of pretense and self-righteousness are just that: pretense and self-righteousness.

It's in the 23rd and 24th verses of Psalm 139 that David requests something of God we must all request: "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." Could we respond with anything less?

And David says, "A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." (Ps. 51:17b) It's the call to face realities. Here's how it works: We **ain't** that great - we must bow low - we don't want God's calling us to a repentant heart to be like God drawing pictures on water - God save us from the pursuit of cheap grace!

Christ specifically came into the world to address our sin, it's wages of death and hell, to cancel our debt of sin through His suffering and death, to secure our forgiveness and heaven! The immediacy and importance of that cannot take a back seat to life. Hence, the parable . . .

IV. The Parable.

And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'" (vss. 6-9)

In the first place, the parable refers to God's relationship to Israel. The owner of the vineyard is God. The fig tree is Israel. The man who took care of the vineyard is Jesus. The three years represents the era of grace granted to Israel. That grace was mostly rejected. The parable says, "(The man) came seeking fruit on it and found none." The fruit - the evidence - of repentance was absent. God worked for their salvation. Most of Israel played, because humans love to play, and wasted the time of God's grace.

And, then, the most frightening of words: "Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?" God's patience comes to its end. Then comes the plea: "'Sir (said the vinedresser, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

As always, Advent impresses upon us the willingness of Christ to enter His creation and bear the guilt of our sin and suffer and die for our sin crimes. Everyday is a day of repentance for the child of God. Like the fig tree in the parable, we have been planted in the church. With the Law God digs - laying bare our sin. With the Gospel He fertilizes - assuring us of His forgiveness, love and eternal life. Flowing from this is the fruit of repentance: Serving, sharing, sacrificing for the sake of Christ's love.

Luther's Small Catechism states, "Repentant believers are those who are sorry for their sins (contrition) and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior (faith)." (CPH, 2006, p. 226) Then this: "Then good works are bound to follow, which are the fruit of repentance" (Augsburg Confession XII 6). And then, from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus words: "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance." (Matt. 3:8)

There are always those who view their faith from different angles with various excuses; not the least excuse being, "I know I should be more faithful, more serving, more giving, but for now I have these priorities." That's almost cliched! The writer of Hebrews says, "Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, 'today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts...'. (Heb. 3:7-8) There are always those who say, "I know what I'm doing isn't what God wants. I'll get more serious about it later." That's just absurd! The Scriptures are clear: "...now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." (2 Cor. 6:2b) There are always those whose aches and pains keep them away from worship and study, but never from those things that delight the flesh. And I know there are those whose aches and pains genuinely lock them down! I know that. But you know that isn't the point! It makes no difference if you're rich or poor, the words of God that appear in the Parable of the Rich Fool will stand before everyone here: "This night (or tomorrow morning, or tomorrow afternoon) your soul is required of you..." (Lk. 12:29)

It is the Word of Life that calls us. God help us to hear, listen and respond.

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott