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Luke 13:1-9
UNLESS YOU REPENT YOU TOO WILL ALL PERISH

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Have you been watching the news with that devastating earthquake in Chile? That has taken some of the attention away from the earthquake in Haiti. New Orleans is still digging out from the effects of Hurricane Katrina and that was years ago. Every day we hear about some tragedy somewhere in our country and in the world. There are earthquakes, fires, floods, tsunamis, hurricanes and tornadoes. There are plane crashes, train wrecks, automobile pile ups, flu epidemics and a million other sad things that take the lives of people without warning. People have probing and burning questions. Why did this happen? How could God let this happen? Was God punishing these people for some particular sin that they had committed? These same questions have been asked since this world fell into sin and death became its constant companion. These questions were addressed to our Lord Jesus. The answer we get this morning may surprise us. He gives a warning to every one of us as he says UNLESS YOU REPENT YOU TOO WILL ALL PERISH.

Jesus had been teaching the crowds. Sadly things were no different then than they are today. The people were much more concerned about the things of this world than they were with heavenly things. They were much more concerned with the here and now than they were about eternal treasures. Jesus would chide them because they did not want to examine the signs of the times. The Messiah had come. The enemies of Christ were planning his death. There were tensions with the Romans. All of these things would have both temporal and eternal consequences. Did they care about these things or were other things more important?

Someone brought up a very tragic incident. Roman soldiers were pursuing certain Galileans. They were suspected of rebellion against Roman rule. During the Passover as these men were slaughtering their lambs for the Passover Seder, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor violated all Jewish holiness codes by sending his troops into the temple area to murder these Galilean Jews. During this holy feast the blood of these Jews was mixed with the blood of the lambs. You can imagine the outrage at this incident. This was neither the time nor the place for such an atrocity. It was bad enough that it happened but the Romans had no respect for the religious rites of the Jews. It would be just as if soldiers would come into a Christian church and start shooting people as they partook of the Lord's Supper.

Those who told Jesus this story probably had hoped to elicit from Jesus a very strong rebuke against Pilate and the Roman occupation of Israel. Some may have even hoped that Jesus would use his power to gather an army against Rome. That's what they wanted from the Messiah. Jesus would once again disappoint them.

The specific question they had was “Had these Galileans committed some terrible sin and were now being punished by God for that sin?” You’ve heard that one before, haven’t you? Perhaps you’ve asked it. The Pharisees and teachers of the law taught that calamity was a punishment for a specific sin. Jesus’ disciples asked him who was responsible for a man being born blind. Did he sin or did his parents? When we read the book of Job we feel sorry for him, not only because of his sufferings, but also because he had such lousy friends who kept telling him that his suffering was based upon some particular unknown sin that he must have committed. We may find ourselves asking that question as well. “Why me, God? Is it because of something I did back in my college days?”

Jesus then told his hearers that instead of keeping their tongues and minds busy with speculations of what some people might or might not be guilty of, they should focus on themselves and their own spiritual condition. “But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

All of us are going to die some day. We do not know how long we have here on this earth. We call this our time of grace. Death will come and it will come because of sin. It does not come necessarily as a result of some particular sin. It could. A person driving drunk could get killed in an accident or a criminal could get shot as he tried to flee the law. Most of us will die because of the sin of Adam our father. All of us will die because we are sinners. We will all have to appear before God our judge. Are we ready for that? Most people aren’t. They think of death as abnormal. They think that death will always come to someone else, but never them. But that time will come for everyone, perhaps even today!

To reinforce the call to repentance, Jesus brings up an incident in Jerusalem where the tower of Siloam collapsed, killing eighteen people. The Galileans suffered a tragedy caused by a human event. The Judeans died from a tragedy with a natural cause. Neither the Galileans nor the Judeans were any more or less sinful than the other. All people are sinful. Tragic accidents can strike anyone, anywhere, at any time. No one, including God’s people, is exempt. Methuselah, the oldest man who ever lived, died the very same year as the Flood. Did he die in the flood? The very same event could take the lives of both believers and unbelievers. Jesus calls not for speculation, but rather for contrition, repentance and faith. This is the time for repentance. Tomorrow may be too late.

Jesus then gives a parable to illustrate the point. God is patient, much more than any of us could ever hope to be. His patience would eventually come to an end with a people that would not bring forth the fruits of repentance. Jesus would remind the people of the words of John the Baptist who exhorted the people to produce fruits of repentance before the tree would be cut down and thrown into the fire.

“A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ ‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”

We can identify with the owner of the vineyard, can’t we? He is a reasonable man. His expectations are reasonable. He has a fig tree and he expects that it will bear figs. It was planted in a choice place in his

vineyard. It was using up the soil. If it wasn't going to be producing figs, then it should be cut down and another tree planted in its place. The owner's expectation was reasonable. This was not a decision that was reached lightly or in a fit of anger. Not only was this tree not producing, it was taking up space for other trees that could and would produce fruit.

So what does this parable mean? Well, we have the immediate context and we have the timeless context that applies for us today. In the immediate context we think of the nation of Israel and the city of Jerusalem. Last Sunday we saw our Lord Jesus weep over the city, the city that had been known for stoning God's prophets and killing those that were sent to her. God himself had chosen Jerusalem to be the center of worship for his people. The temple was there. The priesthood was there. Sacrifices for sin were there. The people had every spiritual advantage. Yet worship had deteriorated into mere show. People just went through the outward motions but their hearts did not belong to God. God sent his prophets to warn the people of their sin, to call them to repentance and to receive the Messiah in faith when he came.

They gave God their answer. One prophet after another lay dead in the streets of Jerusalem, notches on the city's collective gun belt. God looked for faith and he did not find any. It wasn't merely that they had killed God's prophets. They were proud of the fact that they had killed God's prophets.

God was ready to cut down that unfruitful tree. He would give it one more year. The vinedresser, Jesus Christ himself would plead to give it one more year. Jesus' ministry would last for three and a half years. If you count the six months that John had spent preaching repentance, you can readily see the timeframe of this parable.

Jesus patiently preached and taught the people. He pleaded with them. He warned them that God's patience was coming to an end. This was the time to receive him. This was the time to listen to him. This was the time to repent and give their hearts to God. This was the time to produce the fruits of faith, good works of love toward God and toward their fellow man.

Jesus would return to Jerusalem at the time of the Passover to give the city one last chance. He would teach openly in the temple courts. We know what happened. The people would harden their hearts in unbelief. They would go to the very same Pontius Pilate who had slaughtered the Galileans. The people of Jerusalem would cry out, "Crucify him!" The very people he had come to save would reject him. God in turn would reject them. The time of grace that he had allotted the city would run out. The city of Jerusalem would be destroyed by the Romans forty years later. The devastation was so great that not one stone of the temple would be left on top of another.

But don't think that the only application of this parable took place 2000 years ago. The application is timeless. Jesus cries out to every one of us, those here at church, those listening on the radio, and especially those who are very busy with all kinds of things and really don't have that much time for God right now. This is the time for repentance. Tomorrow may be too late. Look at the list of obituaries in the paper this morning. Some of the people are very old. Others are much younger. Many did not see this day coming.

“Unless you repent, you too will all perish.” God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son that whosoever believes in him would not perish, but have everlasting life. This is the critical time. This is the Lenten season. We see the love of God as Jesus would willingly walk the road to Calvary and lay down his life for us on the cross. He purchased for you the forgiveness of sins through his holy, precious blood and through his innocent suffering and death. He proclaims that forgiveness through his Word and through his body and blood given in the Sacrament.

We have absolutely no guarantees that we will be here tomorrow. Our Lord Jesus may return in judgment. God may call you home. Don't worry about other people. Focus on yourself, your sin and your need for a Savior. See Jesus and receive him with faith and joy! AMEN.