

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent, Year C  
Sermon 3.20.22

**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. 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. 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. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. 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.

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; 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. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

**Luke 13:1-9**

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 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? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

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. 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?’ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’” (446)

A man went skating on a frozen river. A member of the faculty of my high school, he skated up stream, as was his habit. True for him and lots of others on campus. Sometimes the whole hockey team would do that just for a change. This man fell through the ice, though, and died.

This happened years after I graduated.

I'd forgotten this until a few months ago when I met a family member of his. Then I remembered it and expressed my horror. “That was so sad, such a shock.”

“Not really,” this woman said, a quick response, with an almost as quick clarification. “I mean, it was sad,” she said, “but not a shock.”

This needed an explanation, she seemed to realize. So, she offered one: that generation of the whole family had been immigrants and the young children of immigrants, southern Europe, inter-war. They'd all been through a lot. Life had already brought its precarity. So, sudden death, though sad, didn't strike any of them as shocking—the sort of thing that has you casting about in your mind as to why, the sort of thing that has you grasping after a reason. To them the shocking thing, or at least the surprising thing, was that life had been so good for so long. So stable: he'd become a teacher, he'd become a husband and a father, and an uncle, and a great-uncle.

Suddenly it seemed my reaction was the one that needed an explanation. Why is this sort of thing not just sad but shocking?

Or is that just me? And certain types like me? Like, we have certain expectations of life, and when we don't get them...?

Luke's gospel starts off so sweetly. Luke's gospel gives us the nativity narratives, most of the ones we know and love anyway. He gives us the angels, the shepherds, the stable, the manger. He gives us Jesus as a baby in the Temple, at his dedication. He gives Jesus as a boy in the Temple, lost to his parents but tight with the teachers there and tucked deep into his "Father's house." Luke gives us the beloved parables of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan.

But his gospel narrative is also a tightening vise. The longer you stay with it, the more pinching and pressured it gets.

I've felt this acutely with the Monday evening book club. We're reading a commentary on the Gospel of Luke, so we're spending more time with the biblical book itself than we've tended to do as we've met on and off for more than a year now. And with each passing week I find myself wondering, are we going to keep going? Does anyone want to stop reading this book now and find another? (Anyone besides me, I mean?)

I keep thinking of *The Muppet Christmas Carol*, a classic take on a classic story. Charles Dickens' story of Ebenezer Scrooge as told through Muppets, it's a movie we Goodmans watch every Christmas season. Gonzo plays Dickens who also serves as our narrator. But when time comes for the Ghost of Christmas Future to show up—spooky, spectral, haunting—Gonzo is out. He swears he'll be back once things are less scary, but for now, we're on our own.

Fine for him to do; I judge Gonzo not. But it seems poor form for a pastor to do, disappear just before Jesus gets to Jerusalem: "See'ya on the flip side, folks!"

In my defense, the book I'm having most difficulty with isn't the Gospel of Luke but the commentary we're reading about the Gospel of Luke. I find myself less and less able to stand with Wright's interpretation of the gospel.

To be clear, N.T. Wright is a New Testament scholar and bishop in the Church of England. He is a giant in the field. But his take on the driving urgency of this gospel is, turns out, not much in line with mine. See, it's not so much that I struggle to stay with Luke in his understanding of Jesus; it's more that I struggle to stay with Wright's interpretation of Luke's understanding of Jesus.

Like, with this time when Jesus was talking with the crowds. The stories he'd been telling have been charged with urgency. The people, it seems, haven't decided, haven't gotten serious. They're dithering and frittering life away on silly worries, and even deep but ineffectual anxiety. It's making Jesus crazy. One guy is worried about whether his brother will get the bulk of his father's estate. Another guy, fabricated in a parable, has such a bumper crop of wheat that it presents to him as a problem, the solution to which, he decides, is just to build for himself a bigger barn. People aren't getting it: that the kingdom of God is here, a kingdom of abounding blessing, a reign of joy and sufficiency and love. And they're asking all the wrong questions. They're concerned with all the wrong things.

Like these people who told Jesus about Pilate having slaughtered some people while they were at worship in the Temple. They told him, it seems, to gauge Jesus as to whether Jesus thought these people had had it coming.

Because they probably did, right?

No, they didn't. They didn't have it coming. They hadn't done anything to deserve this. That's not how God works in the world. That's not how God's justice plays out. To think so, you'd have to getting it all wrong.

It's getting Jesus crazy.

This is how it seems to me, at least. This is how *Jesus* seems to me, at least, increasingly distressed because the people aren't grasping the grandeur of his message, the utter appeal of seeing life how he does, all that it could be which is so much more than it was.

But Wright sees this whole thing through the lens of religion. He seems to believe that the decision the people are to make is a matter of religion. Make the right religious choice; or suffer the consequence of having made the wrong choice. Join the Jesus movement and accept Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God now gathering in its members; or suffer the consequence,

being cut off or cut down. But he doesn't spend much time probing as to what that *means*, what's the content of that or the look of that? It's all very conceptual and rhetorical. It's all very religious and institutional, as it seems to involve membership in the church and some formal confession of faith, but what else? What else are the fruits of the spirit? See, I want to hear from him what life in such acceptance of the reign of God among us looks like. I want to hear from him what a life looks like when lived with one foot set faithfully in the kingdom of God.

When Jesus said, according to Luke, that, unless the people repent, they will perish as these perished, it's not all that clear what he meant by how they perished. These two events of which Jesus spoke are different from one another; the way the people perished are different from another. One is mass death because of political tyranny—Pilate spilling the blood of people at worship, mixing their blood with the blood of the sacrifices they were offering. The other is mass death because of dumb luck, sheer accident—a tower falling and crushing the people beneath it.

One thing's clear, though, neither is mass death because God made it happen. Jesus doesn't seem to be recalling these calamities as examples of God's justice, because they aren't. No divine punishment here.

No, the first is an event the governor Pilate oversaw. A gentile ruler of Jerusalem and the Jews, Pilate chose to have slaughtered some Jews who were just then offering their sacrifices in the Temple. Why he did this isn't clear; whether he did this also isn't clear, as there's no record of this particular event in any account other than this gospel narrative. But such a thing is consistent with Pilate's character and others of his actions. So, maybe just to assert his power, maybe just to remind the people who was in charge, Pilate decided to have a bunch of people slaughtered, so they were slaughtered.

The second is an event that was sheer accident, dumb luck. The tower at Siloam fell and crushed several people in the rubble. This was a tower in the Temple wall, likely near the pool of Siloam, which was where people could bathe so to become ritually clean. It's also the site of one of the miracles Jesus is remembered to have performed according to the Gospel of John.

And neither of these events is presented as justice, people getting what they deserved. This is the point Jesus was trying to make in his rhetorically asking, what, do you think these people were worse sinners than anyone else? Do you think these people were worse offenders than all the other people in Jerusalem? The answer to this is, no, of course they weren't.

So, what moreover could he have meant when he said that, unless those listening to him repent, they would likewise perish? What could he have meant—for now what seemed like a matter

not of just desserts suddenly seems like a matter of just desserts. Now, what had been demonstrations of unjust death—tyrannical in one case, accidental in the other—was being cast as the sort of thing that can be avoided if you just repent, which recasts this whole thing as being a matter of just desserts.

So, what...? If those people had repented properly, Pilate wouldn't have killed them? If those people had repented properly, that tower wouldn't have fallen on them?

Well, those people, then, would simply have died eventually by some other means. We all will, after all. We all will die, even those who repent—unless it's that no one has ever properly repented...?

If so, then, what hope is there for us? What hope is there for anyone?

Come to think of it, what is it to repent?

*Metanoia* is the Greek word, and it names a change in knowledge, a change in mind. *-noia* is knowledge, and *meta* means change but also implies something beyond or behind or beneath, something outside the regular frame of reference or knowledge. So, to repent as a Greek notion is a change of mind that is an expansion of mind, a widening of imagination.

This is related, though, to a Hebrew notion, *teshuvah*, which is translated into English as repent and means also return. This we heard in the reading from Isaiah, an invitation to return to the Lord, who offers things of true value, all freely offered to be freely received. So, to repent in the Hebrew tradition is to return, to return home even, like that beloved prodigal son who at long last came home.

Taken together, as the Greek New Testament arises from the traditions of the Hebrew Old Testament, to repent is to return to some original sort of knowledge, to be informed and transformed and enlarged by the mystery that gives rise as in the beginning.

So, without having done this, Jesus seems here to be saying, those listening to him will perish just as those others perished, those by tyranny, those by accident, those whose deaths had little in common with one another but this one thing: they were sudden. They were sudden.

Shocking, right?

Or maybe not...?

For we all will die. And some of us will die very soon, some in unexpected ways, and even perhaps this very day. This is the concluding line of a parable Jesus just told—about that rich fool who'd recently had a bumper crop grow up in his fields, more grain than he could possibly use any time soon, more wealth than he could possibly enjoy, that rich fool who settled upon this as a

solution: he'd pull down his barn and build an even bigger one. With this, he'd be able to store up his wealth. But, the narrative voice broke in here, that very night his life would be demanded of him, and then whose will all this be?

We will die, the knowledge of which makes us (as far as we know) unique among all other creatures of God's making. So, the question isn't whether we will, the question is what we will do with that blunt fact, how we will incorporate that into our living, how we will reconcile ourselves to that and even find something generative about that, life-giving about that.

It's time to get serious. It's time to decide—which though to decide is also to foreclose. When you decide on one thing, it's to forsake so many other things. Some decisions are exclusive. The most important decisions are exclusive.

For this, make no mistake, it's harder to get serious now more than ever. Jesus thought he was having difficulty with this point? He should see what history has wrought, what two thousand years of human civilization has brought us.

Now? We like to keep our options open. We like the power of the potential more than the limitations of the real, the given. One of the hallmarks of our society in its current state is how offended we seem to get when we bump up against some hard limit that you really can't have your cake and eat it too. You really can't be anything you want to be—which, to say is practically to blaspheme against the American dream, the postmodern promise that everything is what you make of it and if you can dream it, you can do it. You really do have to learn to cope with the fact that some things are simply true, full stop. The world isn't your Airbnb for the night. It's the soil in which you either dig deep to bear fruit or you tumble along, tumble along.

We can't afford such unaccounted-for living. *You* can't afford to live your life so unaccounted. That's to spend a treasure on trinkets. But this is your *life* we're talking about.

So, take a day, of course. Take a vacation. Take a break. Play hooky. Good Lord, we're moving through a pandemic, which has proven also as an opportune time for all sorts of evil—war, social unrest, distrust among neighbors. So do what you need to sustain your spirit.

But then come back, return to the struggle, repent so truly to live.

That's what's at stake. That's why Jesus was getting so piqued. It wasn't a matter of trying to get us to join up with the right religion. It was a matter of trying to get us to get serious, to stop being shocked by life when it isn't what we want it to be—when it involves oppression and accidents and unfairness and thin ice; instead to be grateful that life is at all and that it is, to a

great degree, ours to shape and make good. Good for ourselves, good for others, good for all creation, which wisdom makes clear are all one and the same: it's time.

Now's the time.

Let's do it.

Thanks be to God.