

## ***“Repent or perish!”***

**March 7, 2010**

*Text: Isaiah 55:1-9, Luke 13:1-9*

### I.

In this season of Lent, Jesus’ piercing words—*repent or perish* (from Luke 13)—while, no doubt, more harsh than we might like, nonetheless, get right to the point.

Lent is a time of inner cleansing—of the spirit. It is a time of re-focusing of the mind. It’s a time that invites in us a *turning toward God*.

Throughout the Bible—in the pronouncements of prophets, in the teachings of Paul and certainly, here, in the words of Jesus—there is the *call to repentance*. Repentance is a turning, a turning toward God.

It is a *turning* away from the clamor of the world.

An anonymous person tells about an older, tired-looking dog that wanders into his yard one day. *I could tell, he says, from his collar and well-fed belly that he had a home and was well cared for.*

*He came calmly lover to me, I have him a few pats on his head; he then followed me into my house, slowly walked down the hallway, curled up in the corner and fell asleep. An hour or so later, he went to the door and I let him out.*

*The next day he was back, resuming his spot in the hall and—once again—sleeping for about an hour. This continued off and on for several weeks.*

*Curious about this unfolding, I pinned a note to his collar one day: **I would like to find out who the owner of this wonderful, sweet dog is and ask if you are aware that almost every afternoon your dog comes to my house for a nap. Not a problem; just want you to know.***

*The next day he arrived again for his nap, with a different note pinned to his collar: **He lives in a home with six children, two under the age of three. My guess is he’s trying to catch up on his sleep. Can I come with him tomorrow?***

Certainly, the clamor of the world can catch up to us now and then, amidst all of our busyness: the clamor of consumption, of power, of control ... the clamor of greed—all of the things that create illusions in our spirit.

- Illusions that distort our values and our perceptions.
- Illusions that suggest we’re more important than we are, that the world revolves

around us, illusions that we're perfect, that we're never the one that needs to change, that—always—it's someone else.

## II.

In our reading from Luke 13, two times Jesus tells the gathered crowds to ***repent or perish***. That's heavy stuff. ***Repent or perish***. We get the feeling, right away, that we better pay attention.

As is always the case with the Bible, the context is important. Some folks in the gathering that day were apparently pointing the guilt finger at people who had been killed by Pilate in some violent, oppressive act in the temple.

Their motivation, no doubt, was to exalt themselves . . . to make themselves look good by comparison—their assumption being that *these people had died because of their sinful ways*.

From our more *modern* vantage point, this is—of course—horrible theology. They said to Jesus, *Don't you think that because these Galileans were killed in this way that they were, therefore, worse sinners than everybody else?*

There's an arrogance, here, that is unmistakable and Jesus doesn't let them get away with it. Right away, he says, *No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did*.

And then he brings another example to their attention—a situation they might, again, misinterpret in a similar way.

*And what about those 18 people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them, he says to them. Do you think that they—too 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.***

Tough talk!

## III.

Jesus' larger point is that—no matter anything about us—we all need repentance. The need for repentance is a condition of the human situation. It's got nothing to do with our human behaviors . . . with our worldly accolades and achievements, with our moral rectitude, impeccable character or anything else.

As human beings, we all need a healthy repentance, which is a *turning toward God*.

1. ***Repent or perish*** is not just a rule set aside for those Galileans who have broken the holiness code; it's for all Galileans—even those who obey the rules and get things right every time.
2. ***Repent or perish*** helps us get beyond ourselves ... beyond our tendencies for hubris and getting all caught up in our own world. It helps us approach God on our knees—metaphorically, at least—with a confessional spirit ... part of which acknowledges that we're not in control.
3. ***Repent or perish*** invites in us a humility that we desperately need to be our best selves as Christians and as people of faith. God's word to us through all of this—and certainly to the Galileans who had postured themselves as accusers that day—is simple and straight forward. God is saying:

**Don't be too quick to judge. For how much do you really know about what's in the heart and spirit of another human being? And moreover, You don't know me (God) as well as you think you do.** In other words, God is saying, **don't box me in.**

The prophet Isaiah (this is Second Isaiah this morning, from Isaiah 55) makes this very point in his passionate effort to lift the beleaguered Israelites to a stronger, more resolute HOPE:

*Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.*

*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.*

#### IV.

At first glance, ***repent or perish*** might seem to be a hard, rough-edged word to us from Jesus. We might prefer that he were more low-key and that his words for us—as they often are—were more soft and gentle.

Repentance language is tough language; but it needs to be because there is so much in us that resists it. We resist because we're not always eager to take a hard look at ourselves—at our excesses, our prejudices, our stubbornness, our fears, our anxieties, our pride, our ego and the list goes on.

But the stakes, here, are high. Because if we can get to the repentance; if we can acknowledge our vulnerability and approach God with a humble and confessional spirit, a whole new world opens up to us—

- a world warmed by forgiveness and the experience of abundant life;
- a world where the grace of God overflows with the balm of redemptive love.

On the other side of repentance, the Spirit comes to us with ease and fluidity because we've opened ourselves to God. We've dismantled all of our usual resistance that comes from too much ego, too much need to be in control, too much fear of death and on and on.

V.

If we tell the truth about ourselves, friends, we're vulnerable creatures. None of us gets out of this life alive. Life, even for the most healthy and strong of us, is fleeting. It's the way of things.

As the psalmist reminds us (Psalm 103), ***The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.***

For, you see, the Lord knows (God knows): ***God knows that from dust we were made and to dust we shall return.***

This is part of the *language of Lent* that we pronounce on Ash Wednesday. It reminds us that the only authentic state for any of us is to be humble. Why? Because we *are* human ... and we're vulnerable. But that's a good thing. Good, because it's honest and true to our nature and to the way of God's creation.

In the BIG PICTURE of our common lives, our vulnerability—and the humility it prompts in us—is a gift because it means we must turn toward each other. And when that happens, it's a happy day in heaven.

So, when we really get underneath Jesus' message to us today—*repent or perish*—it's a calling to abundant life. It's a calling to liberate ourselves from the superficiality of life, from the shallowness, the hollowness, so we're able to love more fully and see each other more honestly and truthfully.

It makes everything better. For, again, as the prophet reminds us,

***My thoughts are not your thoughts, And my ways are not your ways.  
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.***

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

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