



Second Chances and Missed Opportunities
Luke 13:1-9; Isaiah 55:1-9

The Third Sunday of Lent, Sunday, March 24th, 2019
First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois
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March 24, 1980 was a bright and sunny morning in San Salvador, El Salvador. Outside the Church of the Divine Providence a car stopped. A lone gunman stepped out and rested his rifle on the car door. Peering through the scope, past the open door of the church and down the long center aisle he focused on Oscar Romero, the Roman Catholic archbishop of El Salvador. Father Romero was in middle of saying mass. As Romero held up the “host” the gunman pulled the trigger. A crack echoed off of the buildings. A red disk appeared on the front of the archbishop’s white vestments. Romero staggered a couple of steps before falling. A pool of blood soaked the little white disks of the now scattered host. Oscar Romero’s assassin was never captured.

This past March 3 dark storm clouds gathered over Lee County, Alabama. No one could guess what would soon follow. A black swirling funnel suddenly dropped from the clouds, a tornado with winds up to 170 miles and hour and four times as wide as the typical tornado tore through farms and homes. Within a matter of minutes 23 people died as the tornado a path a mile wide.

Nearly two weeks ago on March 15 a 28 year old Australian and self-proclaimed white supremacist parked outside two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. He used five semi-automatic weapons as he fired upon worshipers going to prayer--men, women, and children. Before he was through 49 worshipers lay dead. A 50th died a few days later.

In our gospel lesson Luke tells us of a time when Pilate ordered a “hit” on Galileans as they worshiped. Like Romero’s blood soaking the host, their blood mingled with the blood of their sacrifices.

“Do you think”, Jesus asked upon hearing the story, “that because these Galileans suffered in this way (that) they were worse sinners than other Galileans? No. But unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

Then Jesus continued. “Or what about those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam (in Jerusalem) fell upon them? Do you think that they were offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. (vss. 2-5)

A call to repentance in the face of such horrific events seems so out of place, doesn’t it? Why would Jesus say such a thing? It’s certainly not something that we would say, is it? What was Jesus really saying?

Jesus didn’t say that the people killed at the altar or by the fall of the tower of Siloam did anything wrong. They didn’t deserve what happened to them. They were simply minding their own business, going about their lives when their lives came to an abrupt end.

The Psalmist asked God to “teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” (90:12)

Life is short and uncertain. Time, our time is not limitless. “Seek the Lord while he may be found” our Old Testament lesson says, “...let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts.” (Isaiah 55: 6 & 7)

Ordinarily we think of “repentance” as “turning around” or to stop doing something wrong. But that is just one understanding of repentance. Repentance also means “to gain a new point of view”, to get a new perspective, to see the world as God sees the world.

It is only when we understand this that Jesus’ parable of the fig tree makes sense. The fig tree was planted three years before the owner of the vineyard looked for fruit only to find none. Fig trees bear fruit after two years. It is completely understandable for the owner of the vineyard to tell his gardener to cut the tree down to make room for another tree because this tree was obviously wasting good soil. It was unfruitful. It had its chance and didn’t produce.

The gardener, though, asked for more time. “Give it one more year--one more chance. I will dig around it and put manure on it. If after this second chance it does bear fruit, great. But if it doesn’t, then I will cut it down.”

I do not know if you’ve been watching the NCAA tournament or not. You may be keeping a bracket. You’ve seen upsets and comebacks. You’ve felt disappointment. But as you know, each game has a limited amount of time before it is over. James Howell noted that God’s greatest gift to each one of us is “time”. Each one of us has a limited amount of time before the game of our life comes to an end. We have a limited amount of time to do the work that God placed us on this earth to do. There is time for second chances, sure, and even comebacks, but we do not have forever.

You see, this lesson is not about the way we die. It is about the way we live.

To God be the glory. Amen.