

Third Sunday in Lent
The Rev. John Mitchell

Luke 13:1-9

The End Might Come Suddenly

We find ourselves living in a terrible world, a world corrupted by evil on account of man's own choosing. We face the reality that life is short and filled with calamities and human sufferings, and we don't have the luxury of choosing when, how and where we will depart this earthly existence. The end might meet anyone anywhere.

In today's gospel reading which is in twofold, Jesus comes to term with the current events of his time. He is given news about the tragic deaths of some worshipping Galileans who were massacre by Pilate and one of an engineering failure that claimed the lives of eighteen when the tower fell on them. These were unfortunate situations that suddenly claimed the lives of individuals; not due to any fault of their own as Jesus implies that the victims did nothing wrong.

It must be understood that Jesus never equates tragedy with divine punishment as was the case with Job's friends who indicated that Job was suffering because of some evil that he committed (Job 4:7-8).

We will notice in the text that Jesus did not address the tragedies, the disasters or the victims, but he turned his gaze to those who survived and asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them – do you think they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? He said to them, "But unless you repent, you will perish just as they did."

As people in this global universe, we are well informed about calamities, pandemics, natural disasters, genocides, massacres, terrorist attacks and all other forms of violence that suddenly claim the lives of friends and loved ones. But we are still counted amongst the living. But should we mistake our survival as evidence of God's divine favor?

Jesus knows that repentance is necessary for our souls. He said it twice in the text, “but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” What I believe Jesus was driving to his audience and to us in today’s world is the suddenness with which death comes. If we are unrepentant, we might come to find out that our delay may cost our souls to be lost. The just and the unjust faces the same life conditions; we are not immune to calamity, pain and suffering; life is fragile, life is short and it demands of us an urgency to seek the mercy of God as the second part of the text suggests in the parable stated.

As Christians, we are certain of two facts of our human existence – death and judgment. But what if they come so suddenly? When we examine the short parable Jesus told his audience, it is indicative of imminent judgment. John the Baptist warned of imminent judgment when he used this images in Luke 3:9: “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown in the fire.”

This parable buttresses the first portion (13:1-5). Even though we might be survivors of a pandemic, a terrorist attack, a natural disaster and even wars; it is by no means that we are perfect or righteous in God’s sight. As such, a well-tended fig tree even though unfruitful may be allowed to survive, only because it is given additional time to produce a bud. We see patience and mercy being applied to keep death and judgment at bay; we are given second chances in life and not left to our own selves. Something is being done to help us out. It is not the will of God that any should perish, but that all would come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

What is God saying to us? Our times are definitely not in our hands; life is short and fragile. Jesus’ words of repentance and judgment are scary thoughts, but life as a whole is a gift. We find ourselves to be vulnerable in a world full is chaos, but God is still working his purposes out in our lives.

As people of faith, when bad things happen, we still ask questions and at times we don’t get the right answers, we discuss, we cry our hearts out, we mourn. We think about how death comes so sudden and we can do little to preserve ourselves.

As we observe Lent, I am reminded of the prayer of St. Augustine of Hippo titled ‘Remember Christian Soul.’ We recited this prayer every morning when I was in

junior high school. It gives me something to think about every day that comes by; days when the news is unpleasant and unbearable to the ears and for our eyes to behold; as we reflect on all sorts and conditions of men – hunger, warfare, pain and suffering, oppression, persecution, degradation, separation and death; we look to the One who is the keeper and shepherd of our souls.

Realizing that the end might come suddenly, yet we experience grace day by day, may every day that we are given the opportunity to breathe and walk this journey of life, remember these words:

Remember, Christian soul, that thou has this day,
and every day of thy life: God to glorify. Jesus to imitate.
A soul to save. A body to mortify. Sins to repent of. Virtues to acquire.
Hell to avoid. Heaven to gain. Eternity to prepare for. Time to profit by.
Neighbors to edify. The world to despise. Devils to combat.
Passions to subdue. Death, perhaps, to suffer. Judgment to undergo.
-St. Augustine of Hippo