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The Third Sunday in Lent

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Sometimes we tend to gloss over things that are hard, or scary, or that don't make sense. Have you ever been so overwhelmed by the news that you just wanted to hit the fast forward button and skip straight through to the next "good news" story? The idea of glossing over the first part of our gospel reading today is appealing. After all, who wants to acknowledge that innocent people were tortured while worshipping, or that others were crushed to death in the rubble of a collapsed tower? As much as we might want to hide out, or detach ourselves from human tragedy, our faith calls us to stand with those who suffer. As followers of Jesus, we are no more able to ignore the tragedies of our present day than Jesus could ignore the tragedies of his. But with God's help, we can find the strength to go forward.

This past week, I heard one family's tragic story. It was 2018, Carie and her three beautiful daughters lived in the hillside community of Montecito, just south of Santa Barbara. After wildfires ravaged the canyons earlier that year, the winter rains began to fall, and there were concerns about the potential for mudslides. Some homeowners received evacuation notices, while others, including Carie, did not. And so, three days after Christmas, Carie kissed her girls goodnight, assuring them as the rain fell, that they were safe.

When the mudslide hit early the next morning, there was no escape. In an instant, homes were destroyed, bodies were consumed in mud, and twenty-three people died – including two of Carie's daughters. Life as she knew it was gone, and the event left her at a loss for words. The road to recovery: physical, emotional psychological and social, would be long and difficult. Carie could not imagine how to go on, but for her surviving daughter, she persevered.

The story spread through the media quickly, first with responses of shock, sadness and support. Soon though, questions and comments began to arise, some suggesting that those impacted by the mudslide had brought this suffering upon themselves: Why didn't they evacuate? How could they be so irresponsible? That's what they get for building in the canyons.

It wasn't long before someone, perhaps like the crowds with Jesus, mistakenly suggested it was God's will.

With every step closer to Jerusalem, the tone of Jesus' words and the urgency of his message are shifting. Although he has been traveling throughout the land blessing the poor, feeding the hungry, healing the sick and proclaiming a message of love and hope, more and more, Jesus talks about evil and sin, death and resurrection, and today, his emphatic call for repentance.

Some of those with him told of the Galileans killed by Pilate. Hearing this, Jesus challenged them to look at the situation differently. Adding the 18 who were crushed under the collapsed tower to those who died in the Galilean tragedy, Jesus directly dispels the suggestion that God punishes people in proportion to their sins.

Instead of constructing inaccurate, and perhaps harmful explanations for the tragedies and evils of life, He urges them to turn to God and to repent – to put their faith and trust in the one who has promised them life beyond death.

Rather than point the finger on the sinfulness of others in an effort to keep the tragedy at a distance, Jesus demands a radical reorientation of their hearts, bodies and minds. The invitation is direct, and urgent. Turn back to God's Word; follow Jesus' examples of how to live; Repent as if your lives depends upon it, because, it does.

Rabbi Eliezer, a writer of Rabbinic Judaism offers this wisdom, “Repent one day before you die”, the implication being that should one die without repenting, without turning back to God, their end may be far worse. “Does a person know the day they will die?”, he asks. No. Therefore, a person should repent today, for perhaps tomorrow he will die. Hence, according to the Rabbi, one is to pass all of his days in a state of repentance.

How does the word Repent resonate with you? Do you hear it perhaps as a negative mandate from God? Or maybe as a positive invitation? Or does it land somewhere in between? While the tone of Jesus’ voice is urgent, let’s imagine repentance as an invitation. What might that look like for us? How might we make repentance part of our daily lives?

In Micah 6:8, the prophet asks: What does the Lord require of you?” Then responds: “To do justice, to love Mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.” At the heart of repentance is action and relationship. To turn daily to the Lord, in prayer, with repentance and humility is a conscious action designed to draw us into a more intimate and life-giving relationship with God.

When, in the face of difficulties, breakdowns in relationship, and we turn to God with all that we are and all that we are not, asking forgiveness, guidance and understanding, we can imagine God like a master gardener whose call is to tend to our souls with care and feeding. Care that will renew our spirits so that we might step back into the world ready to serve with strength and compassion, equipped to love and serve those in need.

Jesus’ call to repentance isn’t a summons for a general feeling of remorse about one’s bad life. It is a call to examine closely ourselves, as well as the time in which we live, and to discern the ways in which God’s kingdom confronts us, and how with God’s help, we might respond.

Each Sunday we go down on our knees together to repent to God for what we have done, and what we have not done. As we take responsibility for our actions, we acknowledge how we have failed to love, both God and others. And then, we ask and receive God’s forgiveness and mercy. Forgiven and beloved, we are sent into the world, in partnership with the Holy, so that having grown and learned, we might do better, love better, and be able to heal the broken relationships of our lives. Repentance names the change (the transformation) that occurs in us when God meets us and reshapes our understanding.

It may feel like it takes a lifetime to get it all right, Jesus and Rabbi Eliezer certainly make clear this is not a one-time or once-a-week act, but something we’re encouraged to do every day. This is because growth and change take time. If we choose to practice repentance every day, God will meet us there, not merely to reduce our suffering, but so that we might come to rely upon God as the source of our lives.

Regardless of how hard we try, ultimately, we cannot avoid death. It comes to us all with little to no regard for who we are or have been, saint or sinner. Regardless of when, where and how we die, death is the great equalizer. But it does not have the last word. The good news is that beyond this mortal life, Jesus promises eternal life for those who believe and repent.

Can you hear the urgency in Jesus’ voice? Can you hear his invitation? Repent! Not for just a day, but every day. Not just in word, but in action. Turn to God, as if your life depended upon it. Because it does.