

## SERMON SUNDAY MARCH 20 2022

Lent 3c Luke 13:1-9 “Holy Manure”

Dear fellow redeemed, a former parishioner often told me, you know pastor “We could use a few more fire and brimstone sermons.” Every time he said it I thought, really?

Well, he’s gone home to be with the Lord, but today I’m going to partially grant that request. Here are a few excerpts from one of the most famous sermons in church history. It was preached by Jonathan Edwards to his church in 1741 and was entitled “*Sinners in the Hands of Angry God.*”

***“The wrath of God burns against his enemies...The pit is prepared, the fire is made ready. Hell opens its mouth wide to receive them. There is nothing between you and hell—but air. God holds you over the pit of death as one holds a spider over the fire;***

***God is dreadfully provoked; his wrath toward you burns. O, sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in; it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit full of fire, that you are held over....in the hands of an angry God.”***

What would you think if I preached such a sermon complete with pulpit thumping scare tactics? You might think old’ pastor Randy has gone over the edge and needs an extended vacation. (Hmm...not a bad idea!)

Seriously though, to be a sinner in the hands of angry God is the stuff of nightmares. Thankfully we know that for Jesus’ sake, God is gracious and merciful.

On the other hand, we must not minimize the danger unrepentant sins pose to the fate of our immortal souls.

So even though Edwards’s sermon was quite a bit over the top, he highlighted an important truth, one that echoed by Jesus in today’s Gospel reading.

To review, people asked Jesus about the Galileans killed by Pilate’s troops while they were worshipping at the temple. Jesus then asked the crowd if they felt that those killed were worse sinners than others.

That was, and is, a common way of thinking about God. If some tragedy befalls you, you must’ve deserved it.

So just imagine the look on the questioners’ faces when Jesus replied, **“No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will likewise perish.”**

Jesus doubles down on his point by referring to another tragedy. He asks, **“Or those 18 on whom the tower of Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who**

**lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”**

Jesus is saying that God is deadly serious about the consequences of sin. His words are a stern warning to those who persist in their sin: Repent or die.

The truth is: Sin is totally intolerable to God because it's a rejection of the way God designed us to live, and those who fail to repent will die eternally. **PAUSE**

Jesus' words must have been like a slap in the face to those who brought the subject up. Before, they likely looked down on the victims of those tragedies; now, they were looking down at their feet, avoiding Jesus' gaze.

To drive home his point further, Jesus tells them a parable about a fig tree that wasn't producing fruit.

The vineyard owner, God the Father, notices a fig tree that wasn't producing fruit. He demands that the gardener cut down the unfruitful fig tree immediately since it's just taking up moisture and nutrients.

The problem is you and I are the fig tree in question. And if we're honest with ourselves, we'll have to admit that God has every reason to question just how fruitful we have been and admit we need to be cut out of the vineyard.

Thank God Jesus doesn't leave it there. Jesus, our mediator, is the gardener, and He intercedes for us, saying, **“Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure.**

**Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”**

The Greek verb translated here, “leave it alone” has the same root as the word scripture uses to translate forgive.

The point of the story is that we need to praise God for his patience, grace, and kindness in giving us time to bear the fruits of repentant faith. If we are receptive to the holy manure/fertilizer he applies, we are enabled to grow. **PAUSE**

My friends, today Jesus bluntly tells us to repent of our sins or we will die. But what does it mean to repent?

Some wrongly misunderstand repentance as something we have to do; that we need to strive to avoid sinful behaviors and thus lift ourselves up to a proper moral level to become acceptable to God.

But if we can repent through an act of sheer will, then why would we need a Savior? So that can't be right.

In truth, repentance *is the Spirit of God turning us toward a God who has already turned himself toward us.*

It is a Spirit-given and Spirit-driven desire to return to our Father who has been waiting for his prodigal children to come home.

It is a new orientation toward God, who has already broken into our lives with his love and grace.

Yet our sinful human nature prods us daily to turn our backs on how God wants us to live as his children.

The good news is that the One who is in us is greater than the one who is in the world.

In Baptism, God claims us as his children, attaching us to Jesus, the true vine. In him, we who are branches can bear good works, the fruits of repentance.

But those good works are not anything we can claim credit for, for they are initiated and empowered by God.

As Jesus said, “**apart from me you can do nothing.**” Indeed, no good work is acceptable in God’s sight unless it is done in faithful response to the love God has first shown us in Christ.

That’s why we need to remain in the Word and receive Communion often, for through them, Jesus, the gardener of God’s vineyard, fertilizes our faith and prunes us so that we can bear more and more fruit. **PAUSE**

I began this sermon by quoting Jonathan Edwards’s sermon, “*Sinners in the hands of an angry God,*” which he preached to his church in Northampton, England, some 280 years ago.

It’s a famous sermon because it sparked a time in English church history called “The great awakening.” The following decades saw many people come back to church. Edwards successfully “scared people into church.”

But God doesn’t want us to approach him cringing in fear. Instead, as the catechism states, God desires we see him as a dear Father who loves us despite our many failings.

That’s why Lutheran pastors don’t often preach fire and brimstone. Instead we proclaim a theology of the cross; that Jesus endured the wrath of God for you so that you don’t have to endure eternal torment.

Edwards said that there is nothing between you and hell but air; we believe that the only thing between you and hell is the cross of Jesus and the blood he shed there so that your sins might be forgiven.

For Jesus’ sake, we **are not** sinners in the hands of an angry God, but sinners in the hands of a merciful God.

God wants all people to turn and be saved and he provided for the means of their salvation by directing his anger over our sins onto Jesus.

Jesus gave himself for us. On the cross, nails, thorns, and a spear dig into His flesh and we are cleansed and healed by His blood shed for there on Calvary.

And we receive the very same blood every time we come to the altar to strengthen our feeble faith. **PAUSE**

My friends, God expects his redeemed children to bear fruit, but it is not fruits of our own will, but the fruits of the Holy Spirit.

It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to be patient, kind, faithful, peaceful, and to rejoice always.

It is the Spirit who gives us the ability to exercise self-control.

It is the Spirit who allows us to view helping our neighbor as an opportunity, not a burden.

It is the Spirit who empowers us to do good works not because we have to, but because God allows us to distribute his blessings through our hands, feet and mouth, etc.

And to the extent that we reflect God's will for our lives, living at peace with God and our neighbor, the Spirit gets all the credit, honor, and glory.

My prayer for all of us today is that we be empowered to respond to God's love for us in Christ by living lives of daily repentance, gratitude, and service as we praise God for delivering us from the death sentence our sins deserve.

I pray this, in Jesus' name, the name above all names, for to Him belongs all the glory for our salvation. **AMEN.**