

# No Time Like the Present

A sermon in the 2022 sermon series “Reading Between the Lines”

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March 20, 2022—Third Sunday in Lent

**Luke 13:1-9 NRSV** <sup>1</sup>At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup>He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” <sup>3</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. <sup>4</sup>Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

<sup>6</sup>Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. <sup>7</sup>So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ <sup>8</sup>He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. <sup>9</sup>If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

They were upset. Angry. Scared. A group of people told Jesus of a tragedy that had occurred in the Jerusalem Temple. Some Jews from the region of the Galilee had pilgrimaged south to make their Passover sacrifices in the Temple. While carrying out their religious rituals, the soldiers of Pontius Pilate killed them, apparently out of fear that they were rebellious Galileans who had come to the city with seditious intentions. The witnesses couldn’t get out of their minds the sight of the blood of the sacrificial animals mingling with the blood of the slaughtered worshipers. We can relate: we’re upset by the pain and horror we’re seeing in scenes of warfare’s senseless and indiscriminate destruction in the Ukraine.

Well, when the visitors finished their tale of horror, Jesus seized upon a “teachable moment.” He asked, “Do you think that those Galileans suffered that demise because they were more sinful than all other Galileans?”

Actually, that probably is precisely what the witnesses thought. In ancient times it was a popular belief that sin was the cause of disaster—in other words, if something bad transpired in your life, you probably did something to deserve it. But Jesus refuted that notion, asking, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you.”

Then Jesus addressed the witnesses: “But unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

“...*You’ll all perish as they did...*?” Jesus wasn’t predicting a murderous ending for those witnesses. He didn’t mean they would perish at the hands of soldiers. What Jesus meant was that they would die unrepentant like those Galilean worshipers going about their activities never suspecting that their time was almost up. “Jesus rejects the

common view that the quantity of one's sufferings [indicates] the amount of one's guilt."<sup>1</sup>

Then Jesus reinforced his point: "Or those eighteen who were killed with the tower of Siloam fell on them – do you think that they [died because they] 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..." that is, you will die not having repented and being reconciled to God.

Repentance is the issue for Jesus in this episode. His point is that the best time to repent is now because who knows what will happen.

Lent is often understood as a season of repentance. To repent means to turn around, to turn away, or to turn back. Repentance is an act of self-examination. When we take stock of our behavior and our thoughts, we become aware of our failings, our faults, our sins. Theologians would say that our sins might be sins of commission or sins of omission.

- Sins of commission refers to things you *committed*: things you did that you shouldn't have done, like selfishly hoarding an excessive quantity of something that you knew was badly needed by others.
- And sins of omission are things you *omitted*: not doing things you probably should have done, like not forgiving the one who sincerely apologized for the hurtful remark they made about you.

I don't mean to beat up your ego or burden you with unreasonable guilt. But here's the truth: every one of us has reason to repent. We probably do the best we can much or even most of the time. But inevitably in our daily interactions we fall short of displaying God's unconditional love, God's abundant mercy, God's gracious forgiveness, God's endless generosity.

We sin. We have reason to repent, which simply means to turn away from what is self-centered and to turn toward the example of Jesus. And a reason we observe a season of Lent *every year* is because we're always in need of repentance. "Repentance is not something which one does once and forgets. It's like marriage vows, which are pronounced at one particular time but must be renewed daily if the marriage is not to crumble, especially in times of severe stress."<sup>2</sup>

Why worry about repentance now? Why not later? After all, we modern mainline traditional Presbyterian Christians don't tend to spend much time worrying about "end times" and "divine judgment." Oh, sure, we've heard the biblical parable that likens God's eventual day of judgment to the action of a shepherd who separates the sheep and the goats: the good sheep are brought in this way, but the bad goats are sent away in the other direction. The Day of Judgment is when God will separate the sheep from the goats, the blessed from the cursed, the holy from the hellish. But many modern Christians aren't too worked up about that.

One of the reasons we don't seem to be terribly concerned with some time of divine judgment is that that time, that date, that deadline for cleaning up our lives is,

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Karris, *Invitation to Luke*. Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1977, 164.

<sup>2</sup> Robert J. Karris, *Invitation to Luke*. Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1977, 164.

well, uncertain. We don't know when that day will come. As Jesus once put it, if the homeowner knew when the thief was going to break in, he would have done something to prevent it.<sup>3</sup> We always figure we have more time... more time to love and appreciate our families, more time to get our work done, more time to get to know our friends better, more time to do those things that we've always said we want to do... and more time to make amends for things we've said or done that we regret.

But at some point, there is no more time. Time's up.

In the newspaper perhaps you've seen a comic strip called "Zits" about a typical goofy teenage boy named Jeremy who can only see the world from his adolescent point of view. In a recent strip he was preparing to hand in an assignment for school. If you've not been in school for the last decade or two you may not realize that "handing in a paper" is an anachronism. It's far more common for students today to submit papers electronically rather than printing them out, putting a staple in the corner, and leaving it on the teacher's desk.

In a recent strip Jeremy's dad asks him if he's turned in his assignment yet. Jeremy explains that it's supposed to be submitted electronically but that it's not due until midnight, and why would anyone submit it hours before it's due. Jeremy waits with his laptop. Ten o'clock. Eleven o'clock. Eleven-forty-five. A minute before midnight. Thirty seconds before. Ten seconds! Jeremy hits "Enter" to send the paper. A message flashes on the screen: "Stand by. Wi-Fi malfunction. Message did not go through. Try again." And with that unanticipated glitch he ran out of time and his paper was "Late." The young man didn't account for how much time he really had available.

Nor do we. Now, we shouldn't have a morbid fixation on the fact that none of us has an infinite amount of time given to us. But I'm sure there are moments when the limits of our mortality come in view briefly. For instance, I don't dwell on this... but sometimes when I'm driving out of town or even if I'm driving to the store, once in a while the thought passes through my mind, "You know, something awful *could* happen to me today. Probably won't. I hope not. But it *could*...."

Yes, from time to time we realize that time is a finite and unpredictable asset. That means that the right time to make things right is right now.

There is an urgency to our need to repent. But there is also a word of grace.

Jesus followed the calamitous stories of the temple executions and the tower collapse by telling a parable. A homeowner was frustrated that a fig tree planted in his garden three years earlier had yet to produce any fruit. "That's it — time's up! Cut it down!" he told his gardener. But the gardener interceded on behalf of the tree. "Sir," he said to the homeowner, "Give me one more year to nurture the plant to bear fruit."

We presume that the "extra year" was granted. That act of forbearance symbolizes God's grace in showing mercy when judgment is expected. Yes, God's judgment will come to pass whenever God decides it's the appropriate time. Who

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Mt. 24:43

knows, maybe it's already overdue except that our lifetimes are unfolding in that "extra year" when we are benefitting from the nurture and feeding of the gardener!

What can we take from today's gospel lesson? Here are two ideas:

First, live each day as the gift from God that it is. When and how can you create a moment to appreciate the gift of each day? What moment of the day, what action of your daily routine can trigger your simple prayer of "Thank you, God, for this day"?

Second, appreciating that gift, reconcile with God through repentance. Take just a moment to pause and become mindful of what you've done that you shouldn't have, mindful of what you didn't do that you should have. Then offer a simple prayer of "Thank you, God, for accepting me as I am and leading me to what you want me to become."

There is an urgency to our need to repent. But there is also a word of grace. The right time to make things right is right now.

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