

## **“Turn the World Around”**

**Luke 13:1-9**

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This is one of those lectionary texts I'd just as soon not preach on. In it Jesus says: "Repent! Or you will all likewise perish." I have vivid memories of being a small child sitting in the pew beside my mother and cringing at the sound of those words. They scared me to death! What did repent mean and how would I know if I'd done it?

First, Jesus says that people don't always get what they deserve. The Galileans, Jesus says, weren't worse sinners than others. That's not why Pilate slaughtered them. And the eighteen people who were killed when the tower fell were not caught in this accident as a consequence of sin. We all know folks, good folks, who have suffered greatly and perhaps even been killed and sometimes we catch ourselves thinking, "Why them? Why not me?" Jesus says that crime and punishment are not always commensurate. And being good and having good things happen to you doesn't always follow either.

Now sometimes sin bears natural consequences. If I kill someone, the consequences follow. If I waste the gifts God's given me, my life proves meaningless. If I refuse to be part of the community of church, I don't have that community to support me in times of trial. But consequences are sometimes disproportionate to the sin. Sometimes the sentence is more than we deserve! Jesus doesn't really answer the question of why bad things happen to good people. But he keeps repeating the refrain "unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." After examining this phrase carefully, I believe three words are key. Those words are: repent, you, and all.

Let's start with the later two words: you and all. I think this is the plural "you," and "all" is quite obviously plural. Jesus is talking here not so much to the innocent individual who doesn't reap rewards for a godly life or to the individual sinner in need of salvation, but Jesus is talking to the corporate "YOU." As they say in Texas, "you all" or "ya'll" -- all you together. Jesus is talking about society as a whole, a culture that has developed and maintains itself in ways inconsistent with God's purposes.

It's so hard to remember this corporate YOU because we Americans are hard wired with rugged individualism. But in Jesus' world they did not think so much about individual salvation. They thought about the community, the salvation of a nation, because they knew that if individuals were saved, it was only because they were part of a community that fostered their salvation. The other day Denzel Washington was on Oprah and spoke in support of Boys and Girls Clubs. He said that when he was growing up, these places were safe havens for him. While several of his friends were either in prison or killed in gang violence, Washington found success. He said that he had lots of folks praying for him including his grandmother who prayed everyday for her children and her children's children. This is the power of community!

Jesus community understood that they were all in the same boat! They'd float together or sink together. It doesn't matter how good you are individually, if you're trapped in a community that is determined to defeat you. In this text Jesus was not talking about repentance for the sake of a heavenly home. Jesus cared about folks in the here and now. He wanted them to be saved today, right here, right now! Salvation meant to turn the world around. To break down systems of entrapment and evil.

The second example Jesus talks about is the tower of Siloam. It fell killing eighteen innocent people. We know something about towers falling. When the Twin Towers fell innocent people died. As Jesus would say, "Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in New York City?" Would Jesus follow by saying these words, "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Now it's time to talk about the third word: "repent." The word "repent" in Hebrew means literally, to turn around and go a different way. It means to stop walking in the direction of one view of the world. It means turn the world around! Jesus understood how the world was set-up. He saw the "big picture" of the world with *systems and structures* set up so powerful people could dominate vulnerable people. In modern times, it wasn't enough for our country to make token gestures that all people could be equal yet separate; that didn't work. The civil rights

movement required more than just a few individuals “doing the right thing.” Our whole country was lost. We had to stop, ask for directions, and go a different way!

I think you can see why I asked Jim to lead us in our opening hymn, “Turn the World Around.”

*We come from the water,  
Cool, refreshing water.  
Go back to the water,  
Turn the world around. (repeat)*

**Chorus:**

***Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh,  
Turn the world around!***

*Verse 2: We come from the fire...God's refining fire*

*Verse 3: We come from the mountain...God's most Holy Mountain*

*Verse 4: We come from the Spirit...God's most Holy Spirit*

*Verse 5: We all seek a new world,*

*All of us a new world.*

*When we find a new world,*

*Turn the world around. (repeat)*

How do we do it? How do we turn the world around? There's a couple of clues in verses 6 through 9. Jesus tells a parable of the fig tree that won't bear fruit. The owner is sick and tired of the tree and wants to cut it down. It's no good for nothing! But there's a gardener in the parable. The wise gardener says, there's another way! Let me nurture it; fertilize it; let me give it time; and let's see what happens. The alternative to cutting down the fig tree is gentle care, offering the plant nutrients, and time. And the gardener must get down on her or his knees and get their hands dirty. It's a different vision than the violent world of Jesus' day...and of ours where we trash what doesn't produce.

To repent means to try something new. It seems so easy to just keep repeating the past. Why not try an alternative way of slow, deliberate relationship building, of nurture and care. And to repent means to turn around our thinking and think long term rather than immediate comfort. This short term thinking is why our planet is in trouble. We didn't want to hear what scientist have told us for years because we'd have to change our comfortable way of life. Now big business is telling us to pay attention; and only now when they talk, does the country as a whole buy into the idea that we must turn the world around. We've had to wait for energy companies to say the words: “Repent, or you'll run out of oil.” Whatever happened to words of Jesus being music to our ears!

Jesus saw a world that was lost and perishing. And he loved that world with every fiber of his being. He loved it as God loves it. And he spoke to the world, like a mother shouts to a child about to touch a hot stove-- STOP! Get away from there! Jesus said, you, you all, we all together as community must turn the world around. The powers that controlled Jesus' world didn't like his method because they knew that if people really listened and followed, they couldn't defeat this man of God. They wanted the world to stay just like it was. It served their purposes. That's why his teachings led him closer to Jerusalem, closer to a cross.

If God uses us to turn the world around, what kind of world will that be? It's the world described in the ancient words of the prophet Isaiah. It is a world where spiritual thirst is quenched, where the heavenly food that really keeps us alive is given freely, at no charge! Where God's covenant relationship once offered to David is offered to us. So we have some choices to make. Will we seek after God and put all our efforts into a new and different way? Will we be God's gardeners, getting down on our knees and getting our hands dirty in order to nurture God's creation? May God give us the courage and strength to go out and turn this world around!