

The Third Sunday in Lent • February 28, 2016

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Luke 13:1-9

“Take Heed”

Where's that Jesus who people expect to see? You know the one: he's gentle and kind and has nice things to say about everybody. The one that's in all those paintings you see in museums. Where did Luke hide *him* in today's Gospel reading? There, we hear about a Jesus who's warning people about perishing – you know, dying. Where are the still waters and pastures green and all that stuff? Instead of those happy and pleasant thoughts, this Jesus is talking death, destruction, and fruitless fig trees. Where's the loving Jesus?

He's right there, front and center. The loving Jesus is the one warning who have gathered to hear his words. As he speaks to the crowds, Jesus knows that the time is growing short. He knows that his journey to Jerusalem will mark the end of his ministry on earth, and so he again calls his hearers to understand their reality as flawed people in a broken world. Jesus speaks to correct their assumptions.

What assumptions have you made about Jesus? If you presume him to be a nice, tame guy who had a lot of good things to say about how we should love God and love each other, you're only thinking about a caricature of Jesus. Jesus' love for you and me and every other human being isn't limited to hugs and smiles and happy feelings. It's active love. It's love that won't sit idly by as we head towards harm and hell. Like a parent or guardian who sees a child towards a cliff and shouts to get their attention, Jesus calls you and me – along with the crowds – to look out and pay attention to our situation, lest we fall.

Lent is a time to take heed. As you journey through the 40 days of this season leading up to the high point of the church year, listen to God's call to examine how you live. In our reading today from 1 Corinthians (10:12), St. Paul wrote, “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.” That wisdom stands the test of time. Rapper, record producer, actor, and filmmaker Ice Cube echoed Paul's words with the exhortation: “Check yourself before you wreck yourself.” And wreck ourselves we do.

Jesus' response to the crowds pointed to two particular ways in which all people are in danger of falling. **The first of those is arrogance.** The people seem to have come to Jesus for an explanation of why bad things happen. “Did those Galileans die because they deserved what happened to them?” Implied in their question, though, is the assumption that they who are asking are better than those who were murdered by Pilate's troops in the very act of worship. You and I might not be asking that question, but we still feel the temptation to view ourselves more favorably than another person, particularly if we think they're in the wrong.

Beyond arrogance, though, Jesus is calling the people to stop being complacent. **Complacency, the second danger against which he warns,** leaves people sedentary in their faith. It can leave you feeling entitled to the identity that God gives you as a gift. Complacency turns Christians into hypocrites and Pharisees, people who spurn God's Word and His promises instead of following Jesus as his disciples. God has adopted as His own children, and we are meant to follow Jesus. If we're not actively following our Lord in our living, we're heading in the wrong direction, running towards cliffs of our own choosing.

Arrogance and complacency can be fatal to your faith. They turn us from God's grace. If we don't repent, if we don't turn around, we will perish as Jesus said. Check yourself before you wreck yourself.

This is where we come back to the loving Jesus, that Jesus who speaks to the crowds about death, destruction, and fruitless fig trees. The Messiah has come into the world to bring about the restored relationship with God that humanity has needed since we first fell into sin and separation from our Creator. The time has come! That's why Jesus tells the crowds that they, likewise, would be destroyed if they kept going in their chosen course. This is an opportunity from God for the people to repent before experiencing His divine judgment. God doesn't want them to perish. He loves them. Hear again God's own word from today's reading from the prophet Ezekiel: “As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezek. 33:11) But God will judge, nonetheless. There will be a reckoning for our sin, for our arrogance, for our complacency. There has to be.

Suffering and tragedy are signs that our world is broken and under judgment, for all of us. The deaths of loved ones and strangers alike are indications that life is not what it should be; that it ends. **The truth**

of the matter is that the suffering and tragedy are calls to repentance for all people. Jesus wanted his hearers – both the crowds that day and you and I now – to know that we should never think “They must have deserved it.” Rather, we should all know “I deserved the same.” And from there, “Thank God that Jesus perished in my place and in the place of us all.”

Listen to Jesus and hear his message. Acknowledge to him the sin that has infected your living, especially arrogance and complacency. Repent, laying that sin down before his cross, and hear this good news: God has no pleasure in your perishing.

God loves you, and the cross that dominates the time of Lent is the evidence of that love. Praying Psalm 85 together with the people of Israel, we come before our Lord and seek His forgiveness. And He forgives! He covers our sin so that it no longer marks us as those deserving His wrath. In our place, Jesus took the full weight of His Father’s judgment into death. Jesus delivered you and me from God’s wrath. He perished for us. We see God’s mercy on humankind by looking at His Son. What’s more, God sets limits on the temptations we face. He provides a way of escape. **Check yourself because God doesn’t want you to wreck yourself.**

Listen to Jesus’ call to take heed and watch your life, living in faith through this season of Lent and beyond. Do not spurn God’s Word and His promises, but take them to heart, understanding that His promises are for you. **Follow Jesus away from complacency.** Be proactive as God’s people in Christ, living out that new identity He has given to you. Be on alert for the good you can do wherever God places you. **Follow Jesus away from arrogance.** Practice humility: not false humility, but use the gifts that God grants with an honest awareness of your situation and your dependence on His grace. Listen to others with respect and patience, serving them as Christ has served you.

Where’s the loving Jesus? He’s right here, front and center, for you.

Amen.