3rd Sunday of Lent, Year C
Sermon 3.23.25

Isaiah 55:1-9
Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Luke 13:1-9
At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 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? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

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. 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?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'" (446)

The last three weeks have featured three memorial services for me—Friday, Saturday, Friday. Two of these I officiated, both in Monterey. At one of these I offered a reflection, at my home church among my home congregation in North Hampton, New Hampshire. Two of these were for men who died old and full of years. One of these was for a much younger man who ran out of time. Ten years younger than I am, and someone I've known for twenty-five years: turns out his recovery from addiction would have taken more time than his addiction allowed. All of these affected me personally. These deaths: for differing reasons they affected me personally.

I'm wiped out.

Another thing they affected was to put on my lips the following phrase: "Help us to be deeply aware of the shortness and uncertainty of human life…" This comes from the *Book of*

Common Prayer and often wends its way into the pastoral prayer I offer at funerals and memorial services. I like it because it calls to people's minds the givenness of life, the fact that it's a gift which will last for us what it will last. We can't manage to get more of it. We can't trick out of time more years than we're allotted—allotted by mystery, or by grace, or by accident or chance or fate. To be deeply aware of the shortness and uncertainty of life: it's a gentle way of saying what I think Jesus was saying here, but far less gently: "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Luke's gospel is a sneaky one. It sneaks up on you. It starts off so sweetly. Luke's gospel gives us the nativity narratives, most of the ones we know and love anyway. It gives us the angels, the shepherds, the stable, the manger. It gives us Jesus as a baby in the Temple, at his dedication. It gives Jesus as a boy in the Temple, lost to his parents but tight with the teachers there and tucked deep into his "Father's house." Luke gives us the beloved parables of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. But this gospel narrative is also a tightening vise. The longer you stay with it, the more pinching and pressured it gets.

Jesus is here beginning to pinch and to press. He's losing patience here, losing patience with the people who are focused on all the wrong things. Watching out for themselves, concerned with their safety and security and whether they'll get the goodies in life they really want and feel they probably do deserve, all the while asleep to what really matters, that the Kingdom of God is among them: Jesus is starting to apply pressure, pressure he surely also feels himself.

We're about halfway through here. Jesus hasn't yet turned his wandering toward Jerusalem. That pivotal point comes later in Luke than in the other two synoptics, Mark and Matthew. Jesus is still amidst his wandering ministry. Teaching, healing, restoring, preaching. Here and then there, on this side of the lake and then on the other side of the lake. Here we are amidst this grab-bag of encounters and events, told in no particular order, at least not as far as we can tell. It's as if there are a bunch of important stories circulating in the community for which our writer wrote this gospel and they all just needed to find a place in the written narrative that would go on to become authoritative—authoritative to a degree that our writer likely could never have imagined.

It's worth wondering whether the writers of scripture could have managed their task if they'd known how important what they wrote would go on to be?

How much pressure can one person handle?

Sometimes it's better not to know.

Jesus here, though, is urging a sort of knowing, a wakefulness to something so much easier to fall asleep on, or to tell ourselves certain stories about so to manage the actually terrible uncertainty of things. That there is justice in every chance occurrence. That there is God's justice expressed in every instance of fecklessness or fate. Wouldn't it be nice if this were true? Wouldn't it be nice if everything that happened in the whole wide world did so within the logic of cause and effect, and moreover that effect being a matter of just desserts, that you get what you deserve! Wouldn't that be nice!

And this assuring myth can be read forward or backward. Read forward it can steer your course safely: do this and you'll get that, so if you want that then you should do this. Read backwards it can have you understand why people get the lives and circumstances they get: they got this because they did that. Such clarity! Such formulaic living. Read the book of Proverbs and this is the moral universe you'll find on offer. And isn't it nice!

The thing is, it's not true. Not entirely true anyway. Sometimes you do this and you get this far less desirable other thing, totally unrelated. Totally unrelated. You go for a walk in the city one day and a tower falls on you—and, worse still, then everyone who survives you wonders what you did to deserve this, how indeed to make sense of this.

Jesus refers here to two deadly occurrences, one of which was just reported to him but both of which are otherwise lost to history, one of which was a matter of political power terribly exercised and one of which was a matter of sheer, dumb luck.

The first, in reference to "the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices," speaks of something that apparently just occurred, Pontius Pilate apparently ordering the slaughter of people making their offerings in the Temple at worship. Just there to worship God in accordance with the Law—and killed right there for no apparent reason, an act of tyranny and terror, a moment of brutality that shouldn't be ascribed with any meaning. Because, feckless, ambivalent Pilate: maybe he didn't really mean it, maybe it was just a mood that struck or an idea that came to him, or was brought to him, an effective way to get people's attention and their obedience. Whatever, it certainly shouldn't be taken to mean anything of God. Pilate shouldn't be taken as a (though hapless) vessel of God's justice. These people were simply slaughtered, and it means nothing except what it might indicate about worldly power.

In the same way, the people who were crushed by the falling tower at Siloam. This misfortune should suggest nothing of God's justice or divine intent, and nothing of the victims' worthiness of what they got. Though it might comfort us to imagine it such, there is no reason why

these specific people were in that particular place at the very moment when a tower, presumably long-standing and thought to be well built, came tumbling down and crushed several pour souls. This didn't happen to them because they were worse sinners than all other people in Jerusalem. This didn't happen to them because they worse offenders than any gathered, say, just now to hear Jesus teach.

It just happened.

And there's no good reason for it.

And there's no way to guarantee it won't happen to you next time you're standing near a tower or crossing a busy street or hiking some morning amidst the sweetness of early spring and you slip on some wet leaves—which is to say there's no way to guarantee it won't happen to you. Even if you keep your fingers crossed. Even if you throw salt over your shoulder. Even if you give $100 to a good cause, or $1,000, or a $1 million—though to do such a thing has good reason of its own so, please, by all means, go ahead and give, but not in order to secure you a few more years on this lovely, if unnerving, plane of existence because it won't manage that.

Worse, to add insult to injury, those who survive you, should such a terrible fate befall you, might well blame you, blame you for your fate, construct some story to explain it all. They might do this, they likely will do this, unless…

The word Jesus uses is a familiar one, though one I always encourage us to hear more correctly. Repentance is what he urges: "Unless you repent, you will perish just as they did," which seems to double-down on the very cause-and-effect thinking that everything else around this phrase urges against. This makes it sound like, if you "repent," than you will not die, neither of political tyranny nor dumb luck. But that contradicts what Jesus has implied elsewhere. What's more, it doesn't square with reality. Whether or not we "repent," we will surely die.

Which has us needing to take a closer look at what it is, to "repent," which we do several times a year in this very sanctuary, whenever repentance comes up in Jesus' teaching or the lectionary reading, one of those concepts we think we understand but really probably don't.

To repent isn't merely to recognize your wrongdoing, which somehow here seems to help you escape death. It isn't just to admit how messed up you are or how messed up you tend to make things, which admission apparently would make it so death won't find you. This isn't about you being a sinner. This is about an enlarging of your knowing, a return to a more original and creational sense of knowing.

Metanoia is the Greek word in the New Testament that's translated into English as "repentance," and it names a sort of knowledge (*-noia*) that goes beyond the ordinary sort, *meta* meaning something that's beyond or behind or beneath, something outside the regular frame of reference or knowledge. So, to repent as a Greek notion is an enlarging of the mind. It is, to my mind, to know as God knows which is to know God.

This is related to a Hebrew notion, *teshuva,* a word often in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, which is translated into English as repent and means return. This we heard in the reading from Isaiah, an invitation to return to the Lord, who offers things of true value, all freely offered to be freely received. So, to repent in the Hebrew tradition is to return, to return home even, like that beloved prodigal son who at long last came home, a story Jesus is remembered to have told just one chapter hence, in this same block of stories.

Taken together, as the Greek New Testament arises from the traditions of the Hebrew Old Testament, to repent is to return to some original sort of knowledge, to be informed and transformed and enlarged by the mystery that gives rise as in the beginning. And what this has to do with whether we perish as those whom Jesus tells of perished is a question of whether we'll live amidst such wisdom and fullness of faithful knowledge, or we will not.

The stories of tragic death that Jesus spoke to, the people tragically to have died: they don't have much in common. But two things they do. One is that both groups died suddenly; neither group was expecting it would happen, were possibly even assuming it wouldn't, assuming rather they had all the time in the world, such that time itself would mean nothing, no pressing thing that it was passing, no crucial thing that it was limited. Really, none of the people whom Pilate killed on a whim and none of the people who were crushed by the falling tower headed out into their day thinking they would likely not make it to sunset. They weren't old and full of years; they weren't in hospice care. They weren't engaging in risky behavior, scaling the tower or flipping off Pontius Pilate. The things they were doing with their day were ordinary things, not the sorts of things that typically get you killed. And yet, that's what happened to them—just as could happen to those listening as Jesus taught, that any might perish just as these poor souls apparently perished, surprising, shocking, sooner than expected, losing any more time to wake up to what's actually important.

Another those tragic dead had in common is that it would be so tempting to blame. Really, it's likely that those who lived on in the aftermath of these deadly events did just that, blame them, come to some accounting as to why this happened to them. An unrepentant mind is one that

would insist "these things happen for a reason." An unrepentant mind is one that would insist that maybe the ones who died were bad in the eyes of God—

Which we see all the time, by the way. We witness this all the time, an activity of sense-making that the most pious among us plough forth with. Consider how often such sense is made following some terrible act of death or destruction, that those who suffered it very likely had it coming. So, let's fill in the blanks here: maybe they were gay, or maybe they were liberals, or maybe they weren't saved. Maybe they women who slept around. Maybe they'd had an abortion. Maybe they'd been divorced. Maybe maybe maybe. You hear it all the time.

I recently read David Bentley Hart's short, beautiful book, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* A treatise written in the aftermath of the tsunami in South Asia, in 2004, which killed over 220,000 people, Hart had written a much shorter piece published in response to other published pieces that attempted to make good sense of this shocking event. These, however, weren't good sense; they were bad sense, really bad sense, one after another. Hart's book, worth reading, a corrective to such bad sense, is basically this teaching, Jesus saying that unless repentance reigns, we shall all die with those who survive us taking all the wrong lessons from it—

for repentance here is the sort of knowing that gathers death in as a factor in life, gathers it in not to make us morbid, and not to make us anxious, but to fashion us as accepting of the gift that is life and trusting that, though there might be little of sensible justice at play here, there is ever the promise of the kingdom of God, in the hereafter and the here and now, where a new intelligibility holds forth, a new sense reigns as to what and why and wherefore. We don't need to construct some damning why. We can simply wake up to God.

That some things simply are, that there is so little we can control, that to ascribe reason to things that are more of mystery is to be unrepentant of God, unknowing of God, whom rather we can trust as with us, our beginning and our end and our gracious companion along the way: to be of this mind isn't easy. It's a discipline, and it's one I've had more practice at these last few weeks than is typical, than is comfortable. Rather, it's exhausting. It's just not how we more easily think.

The men whom I've memorialized lately, the ones who died old and full of years, aren't to be understood as different in God's sight than the one for whom time ran out, ran out more quickly than recovery came. That breaking off of life in the middle of things: a repentant mind has us know as God knows, that this life as all lives was a gift—was and is; that this death is a sorrowing; and this life forever secured in eternity is a joy, because that's what God is and that's

what God does, joyfully secure us for life in rejoicing, which are just desserts either for none of us or for all. We either none of us deserve a joyful eternal fate, or we all of us do.

And whatever sense we might make of such things other than this is unrepentance, which shall cast our inevitable deaths in this same closed system of cause-and-effect. But that closed system is not where we live. No, for the realm of God, made so present in the life and ministry of Jesus, is rather where we dwell; and it is open, open to grace, open to the strange logic of redemption, open to that great beyond.

Hold that open, if you can.

Be held in that open when your strength has worn out.

Rest assured and awaken renewed.

Thanks be to God.