

Sermon for March 24, 2019 (Lent 3C)
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Exodus 3:1-15

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

I'm not sure how many of you in the room are baseball fans – if you are, then I know you are just as excited for this week as I am. If you are too occupied by the March Madness basketball tournament or you could really care less about sports in general, that's okay, I promise this baseball illustration will be short and we can dive into the scripture! Thursday of this week is the season opener of the 2019 baseball season. This is a very exciting day for many baseball fans, especially this Minnesota Twins fan. For the past three years at seminary, several friends and I would dress up to celebrate the return of our favorite sport! While this is a very exciting time for many, these next few days are going to be very stressful for several players as they finish up spring training. Many teams are still sitting with 30+ players on their rosters and by Thursday they are only allowed a 25 man roster.

Managers and coaches across the country, right now, are having discussions that will impact the fates of several young players. They will examine the fruits of their spring training, and will decide if they have produced enough to make the team or if they need more time down in the minor leagues to continue to develop.

*Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees.*¹ This isn't a quote from the manager of the Cubs as he is determining his 25 man roster; it's from the 3rd chapter of Luke in the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry before Jesus was on the scene. This is one of the first times readers of the Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles are hearing of repentance, but it certainly won't be the last. From the start of John's ministry he repeatedly makes the call for his hearers to *bear fruits of repentance*² and states that if a tree does not bear good fruit that it will be chopped down and thrown in the fire.

When we think of repentance I think it's easier to think of John the Baptist preaching about repentance, but we don't always think of Jesus, but that is exactly what Jesus is talking about in our passage today. Our passage is situated at the end of a long speech during which Jesus has been engaging with his disciples and followers. It seems as if his hearers are trying to bait Jesus to anti-Roman dialogue. Clearly the loss of the Galileans lives through the actions of Pilate as well as the lives of those lost in the accident with the tower of Siloam were tragedies. These deaths were not due to sin, Jesus makes that clear – it is the human condition to die, at least physically in this space and time.

Jesus doesn't take the bait, but rather turns their question into a mirror to remind those present that they too are in need of repentance. Jesus points out that so often we are focused on what is going on with others, outside of ourselves,

¹ Luke 3:9

² Luke 3:8

rather than focusing on our own state of being. Now, what comes to mind for you when you hear the word “Repent” or we talk about “repentance?” For some it may be a sassy street preacher who tells you to repent of your sins and turn toward Jesus – for others it could be connected to your own practices of reconciliation – it could also make you think of Lent – Tis the season! No matter what comes to your mind – I think generally the word Repent has fallen on hard times. I think it is misunderstood and it is unfortunate.

Repentance is one of the most human and beautiful practices we as Christians can be a part of, I would argue on a daily basis. Throughout the Hebrew bible there are many different words that have been translated to mean repentance, but one of the most popular is *בָּיַשׁ*, which means to turn back or return. Traditionally this is meant that to repent is physically turn from that which was drawing you away from God and return to keeping God at the center of your life. Interestingly, the Greek word at the root of Jesus’ use of repent is *μετανοέω* (metanoëo), which means more along the lines of a change of attitude, a mind set or purpose.

I love the beauty and creativity in God’s creation – these are two different languages from two different cultures and by exploring the stem from the same English word we have found two experiences or understanding of repentance and can enhance our own spiritual practices. I think these definitions connect well with our collect for the day, “*Almighty God, you know that we have no power in*

ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul.”³

Keeping these understandings of repentance in mind, this is where repentance can come into as a daily practice. I can only speak for myself, but I know on a daily basis my attitude, mind set and purpose drift from God. I can easily get caught up too much in my own ego, or overly focused on others much like the hearers of Jesus. It is a daily practice. While the season of Lent is certainly penitential in nature, it is not about a onetime act of repentance, it’s about providing us space to learn about what is getting in the way of our ability to repent.

The parable of the barren fig tree, completely unique to Luke, is what the writer is using to help the reader understand the nature of the repentance that Jesus is talking about. In the parable, Jesus is stressing that the importance of repentance is real – as we heard earlier in the Gospel, the ax is lying at the root of the tree – the tree will be cut down if it is not fruitful, but there is compassion and grace while the tree is barren. It is acknowledged that a tree needs the proper time and nutrients to mature to place in which it can bear fruit. In the mean time the tree is working hard to grow – it is building a network of intricate root systems to make sure it is connected to its water source. It is growing in size, building a foundation that is strong enough to bear fruit.

³ Lent 3 Collect

There is a lot that goes into our bearing the fruits of repentance. But it is not nearly as complicate as sometimes we make it. We learned from our brief Greek and Hebrew study that repentance is our need to reorient our bodies and purpose to God. What we mustn't forget is that God was so desperate to help us understand what true repentance is that God used the most important language that we all can understand from birth, body language, to live among us and to show us how to live a life of repentance.

What our tasks is, this Lenten season, is to explore for ourselves and our community what is keeping us from being able to fully repent, what is the thing that is blocking us from fully turning our full selves, body, mind and spirit towards God and taking on the attitude of Christ? Is God our full purpose? If not, then we are struggling to repent. Thankfully there is no limit to our repentance practice and God is willing to have patience and provide us with the nutrition we desperately need.