

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

The past weeks, the media has been flooded with stories and pictures of the horrors of invasion and war in the Ukraine. Parts of the country are unrecognizable as people flee and buildings crumble. In less than three weeks, buildings, once warm homes to families and pets, have become impossible to live in. Infrastructure that once served millions, has become inoperable and unusable. City centers full of shoppers have been reduced to rubble. Hospitals meant to provide care and sanctuary have become scenes of destruction. Moscow's shelling of civilians and apparent disregard for cease-fires and humanitarian corridors has sparked international outrage.

And so it seems humankind has not changed over the years. Our gospel today begins with Jesus referencing two tragedies that had recently occurred. A group of Galileans had been slaughtered by the Roman authorities under Pontius Pilate. Also, a tower fell on eighteen people and killed them. The difference between now and then is that, in the common view of the day in Jesus's time, most people would explain these events as the result of the people's sinfulness and of God's wrath. In Jesus' day everything that happened to you was seen as God's wrath or blessing. If you were sinful, God punished you. If you were faithful God blessed you.

Now--Make no mistake: these events would be something to be angry about. It was bad enough to be occupied by Pilate and his Roman minions when they did not commit atrocities, but here was an occasion—have you heard?—when he sent soldiers into the sacred precincts of the temple and had men—our countrymen!—cut down like lambs to the slaughter. What could possibly be more violent, more reprehensible, more deserving of condemnation?

The people that came to Jesus wanted him to explain the reason for this tragedy, to offer some justification as to why God would allow such a thing to happen. Was it because these Galileans' sins were offensive to God? But Jesus refuses to have any part of that line of thought. Instead, he moves us to a discussion about our sin and our need to repent, saying, "No, these Galileans were not worse sinners than anyone else, but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

In these stories, Jesus takes God out of the picture. Cause and effect were not what these occurrences demonstrated. Pain, suffering, tragedies and tribulations are all part of life. Bad things happen to both good and bad people. Given the delicate nature of life Jesus says that we should walk in repentance.

So, how do we do that? Are we to constantly ask God for forgiveness for every inappropriate word, impatient action, or unloving thought that we think, say, or do? This certainly would be a path that would enable us to look religious, but

would rob us of any joy, and paralyze us in our ability to serve others. We'd be too busy repenting. Sounds a bit like Martin Luther when he was a monk. He drove his confessor crazy, because he wanted to confess every single sin he committed.

So, what might walking in repentance look like?

--Giving thanks for the gift of life and for the blessings that God showers upon us.

--Acknowledging our dislike for doing God's will above our own, and our hesitation in allowing God to be Lord of our lives.

--Rejoicing that through Jesus Christ we have been adopted as God's sons and daughters and that we can experience a daily, personal relationship with God. (which we hear in our psalm for today—"O God, I eagerly seek you...")

Following the story of the unforeseen tragedies, Jesus shares a story about a fruitless fig tree. There are two sides to this story. First, there is the landowner's disapproval or disgust that the tree isn't bearing fruit. There is however, also an amazing display of grace. The gardener has worked with the tree for three years, but asks for more time. Interestingly enough some fig trees take four or five years to produce fruit. Some things take more time. But I think today, we are even more impatient. We want everything and we want it now. Maybe we need to learn patience as well as the land owner and look at our own gardening abilities.

Certainly, God wants us to be fruitful. God doesn't save us solely for our benefit, but also for the benefit of others. But what fruit are we talking about? Actually, there are three ways we can bear fruit according to scripture.

1. We can bear the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control.
2. We can bear the fruit of service—feeding the hungry, healing the sick, visiting the prisoners, helping those in trouble or need.
3. We can bear the fruit of being used by the Holy Spirit to bring others into a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Bearing fruit is a natural process. It happens as we walk with Jesus as his disciples. If we aren't bearing fruit then something is wrong. Something needs to change. I believe the message of our lessons for this morning is extremely relevant for us living in today's world. It is a message that tells us that there is more to the Christian life than being baptized and participating in weekly communion. Weekly worship is not an end in itself. When we leave this building, we are to walk in faith and strive to live the Christian life as disciples of Jesus Christ.

We need to be intentional in our actions. We need to be patient with ourselves and others. We need to feed our bodies and spirits with life giving food—good nutrition, exercise, and good sleep habits. Mentally and spiritually feeding on positive, life giving thoughts—reading our Bibles and praying, and worshipping and using our gifts to the glory of God and service to others.

Luther says in his Small Catechism regarding baptism and its implication for daily life, that as we remember our baptism, we should seek to die to sin and rise to newness of life as servants of Christ. Our prayer of the day stated it in this way: “Help us to hear your word and obey it, and bring your saving love to fruition in our lives...”

Yet Luke, like Jesus, always leaves this call to repentance open-ended. We must decide if we will repent, if we will respond, if we will focus our thoughts and actions toward Jesus Christ and walk in faith. In reality, as baptized children of God, we not only receive God’s grace for a future life in his heavenly kingdom, we also receive a commission to serve him as ambassadors of his kingdom here on earth. It does little good to complain about our society, unless we are willing to witness to the fact that we live a better way. God does not leave us to our own powers and strength to accomplish the task. God has given us the power of his Spirit to cling to the grace of God, poured out for us through Christ’s death and resurrection, that we might know the forgiveness of our repentant sins. He has given us his Spirit, to walk with us through the wilderness of this world, and the strength of witness to others that we know the grace of God. For do not despair, for God is with us.

Jesus does *not* tell his countrymen that the occupying Romans are the epitome of goodness, or that their oppression is anything other than oppression. However, he will not have himself or his inquirers defined by their enemies. He will not partake of self-righteous anger with his fellow Galileans. We live in a day—not so unlike that of the atrocity-rumoring Galileans—when everyone wants to blame everyone else for the ills of the world. Amid the din, Jesus says, “Hold on. Think about a fig tree. One that has not borne much fruit for a long time. We need to ask ourselves if we are like that fig tree. Are we bearing fruit or just taking up space?” Amen.