

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent

"The Lord is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." (2 Peter 3:9)

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

By our very nature, we seek to order the world around us in a way we think will create peace and order and predictability and control.

We strive for a world where problems get fixed, where good things happen, and where death simply does not fit into the equation!

We live in a progressive world that continually seeks a way forward from all that has come before us -

a "Do-it-yourself" world where even our own shortcomings can be overcome by science or enough focus and determination -

a world so far removed from any real understanding of sin and its consequences, that even the call to repentance is not only irrelevant, but may actually be classified as hate speech!

"Me, a miserable sinner?
How dare you speak to me that way!

At least I'm not as bad as THAT guy; I'm *trying* to do the right thing -

I can *justify*
myself!

And that's what being
a Pharisee basically boils down to...

To be a Pharisee is to be chosen by God, to be “planted in the vineyard,” as it were, and yet to remain fruitless in terms of repentance.

For to be a Pharisee
is to hear the Word without hearing,
to be given the gifts without receiving them,
to be shown the Way of life, and then to reject it.

It is the way that
has no use for the language of repentance -
no use for the language of dependence that confesses our helplessness -
let alone any use for the language of faith that looks to help from *outside* of ourselves.

For the way of the
Pharisee is the way of self-sufficient, self-contained, self-righteous
self-justification that expresses great confidence in ourselves and “our faith”
and devotion to God.

It even expresses a great concern at the tragic death of those
Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices:

What had those poor losers done to hack-off God
this time?

It must have been pretty bad, right?

To which Jesus
basically answers, “You guys just don’t get it, do you?”

I mean, do you really think these Galileans were worse sinners than all
the other Galileans,

or that they were worse sinners than all of YOU, because they suffered
in this way?

Dead is dead, folks -

Dead is the wages of sin.

Dead is what ALL of you ARE, sooner or later.

And unless you repent – unless you turn from your deluded, self-ordered, self-righteous worldview,

dead is what you will remain!

It makes no difference

how or when you go – You can die at the age of 2, 52, or 102.

You can die like those 50 people whose blood was mingled with their prayers at the mosque in New Zealand last week,

or like those 157 people who crashed into the ground on that Ethiopian airliner the week before...

But whichever way you go, dead is dead!

Dead IS the wages of
sin.

Dead IS what I have come to rescue you from –

But dead *is* what you will

remain unless you repent – unless you confess your sin and your need for a Savior,

and place your fear, love, and trust in Me for your forgiveness, life, and salvation.

For you cannot save yourselves from the curse of sin and death! You cannot create and sustain a new paradise – you cannot make a kingdom for yourselves where this ends any other way.

From there, Jesus

tells them a little story about the Israelites of Old, which is actually a little story about them –

which is actually a little story about you and me.

And we KNOW that this story is about Israel and the Pharisees and you and me, because we have heard it all before from the prophet Isaiah.

The Lord planted a
vineyard...

“And this vineyard of the LORD of hosts,”
according to Isaiah, “is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his
pleasant planting;

and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed;

for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!” (Isa 5:7)

God had called and gathered a people to Himself -
His Church! And all He wanted was for them to live under Him in His kingdom in
righteousness and purity forever, but they would not.

All He wanted was
for them to turn from their wicked ways and live, but they would not.

All He wanted was
for them to receive His forgiveness and live at peace with Him and in love
toward one another, but they would not.

So He zapped ‘em...

He destroyed the
vineyard.

He gave them over
to their sin and death, and nothing but a stump remained.

And what does this have to do with the Pharisees?

What does this
have to do with us?

The fact is, we are all in the same position as ancient
Israel.

For God has
planted US in His vineyard.

He has called and gathered US to Himself through Baptism.

And He simply
wants US to live under Him in His kingdom according to His Word.

And yet, we barely even know His Word, and we are
constantly going our own way. (Can you even list the 10 Commandments?)

We are continually
acting as if God did not exist, justifying ourselves, and making a world for
ourselves

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deluding ourselves
every step of the way that God loves us just the way we are.

“Woe to you Pharisees!”

Just a few verses before today’s reading, Jesus
made it clear where we stand:

“You make a show
of tithing while neglecting justice and the love of God.

You make a show of
going to the church holding yourselves up as good people in the eyes of the world.

You expect people
around you to behave in a certain way, but make exceptions for yourselves all
the time.

Woe to you, you hypocrites!

You are like whitewashed tombs, beautiful on the
outside, but full of all uncleanness on the inside.

You may appear righteous
to others, but within, you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matt 23:27-28)...

I can't think of a
better way to describe myself, which means I'm fixin' to die.

And if you're a sinner like me, so are you!

For the ax is laid at the root. And unless you live
in repentance -

unless you turn from your wickedness, return to your Baptism, and live
the life God has desired for you,

then dead is what you will remain for eternity.

Jesus speaks some pretty harsh Words here, no
doubt about it... But they are Words of invitation!

For after that, He
does something interesting -

He actually goes on to act out the very parable He is preaching.

You see, the Pharisees, like all of us and like
the fig tree in the story, are in trouble.

In our old Adam, there
IS no fruit of repentance, no acknowledgement of sin, no fear, love, and trust
in God -

and so we deserve to be cut down.

But the Vinedresser, Jesus, now intercedes for
us.

He stands between us
and the ax -

between us and the wrath to come, doing what is necessary to save us.

He pleads to the Master on our behalf, basically
saying, "Wait..."

Surely You have no

pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live... (Eze 33:11).

Let me do what I can to save them..."

And He does...

He throws Himself
between you and the ax, suffering the wrath and destruction you deserved in
order that you might not be cut down.

And then He GIVES you the repentance you need for
life and salvation.

For repentance is
NOT something you do - it is something you are GIVEN!

"God raised Jesus to His right hand as Leader and
Savior TO GIVE repentance to Israel" (Acts 5:31) according to Acts Ch. 5.

"Then to the
Gentiles also GOD HAS GRANTED REPENTANCE that leads to life" - Acts 11:18.

In other words, repentance,
which is nothing other than contrition for our sin and faith that trusts in
God's forgiveness is *always* the gift
we are receiving in Christ crucified and risen.

Jesus, our Vinedresser, digs deep and exposes the
roots of our sin with His Word of Law,

and He applies the
Good News of His Gospel.

He nourishes us with His own Body and Blood to bring us to new life.

And when we simply receive the gifts He pours out

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when we admit we
are sinners in need of His forgiveness,

then we are indeed bearing the fruits of repentance –

the fruits of *new* life, *new* order –

God's life, God's order,

and God's purpose by which we live under Him in righteousness and purity forever.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

Preached by Pastor Holowach

Sermon text: Luke 13:1-9