

The Third Sunday of Lent (Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Exodus 3:1-8A, 13-15
<i>Response</i>	The Lord is kind and merciful.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 103: 1-2, 3-4, 6-7, 8, 11
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Repent, says the Lord; the kingdom of heaven is at hand.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 13:1-9

The Third Sunday of Lent for Year C continues our journey to Calvary and to Easter through the Gospel of St. Luke. For this Sunday we're going to look at a passage from Luke's gospel that's actually unique to Luke. It has some sayings from Jesus that are only found in the Gospel of Luke, and they are some sayings about Jesus' teachings on repentance. You don't have to be a theologian to figure out why the Church might have put the theme of repentance in the third week of Lent, because the whole Lenten season is a penitential season. But in this case, she lays before us a couple of sayings of Jesus that are specifically related to the role of repentance in our spiritual life as his disciples. Let's go and look at what Jesus has to say to us in the gospel for today and of course we'll go back and look at the Old Testament salvation history as well.

The reading for today is from Luke 13:1-9, so we'll read this together and then we'll try and unpack it:

There were some present at that very time who told him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus? I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Silo'am fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish."

And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser,

‘Lo, these three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down; why should it use up the ground?’ And he answered him, ‘Let it alone, sir, this year also, till I dig about it and put on manure. And if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”¹

Alright, so we’ll stop there. So what do we have here? These are basically three sayings of Jesus that point out the need for repentance. One of them we find in the other gospels (that’s the parable of the fig tree, we’ve seen that before in the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Mark), but the first two, the story of the Galileans whom Pilate massacred and the story of the people who were killed when the tower of Silo’am fell, those are only here in Luke’s gospel. We wouldn’t know about these teachings of Jesus if we didn’t have the Gospel of Luke. So let’s walk through each one of these three examples and try to figure out what Jesus is talking about.

The first one has to do with this massacre of the Galileans by Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator. Now, this event that Jesus is describing here is otherwise unknown to us from ancient history; Josephus doesn’t record it, no Roman records that we know of account for it, so only Luke’s gospel tells us about it. What we can infer from it is that apparently there were some Galileans in Jerusalem and they were in the temple offering sacrifice, as Galilean pilgrims would want to do, and something happened in which Pilate (and his soldiers) massacred them, and evidently Pilate not only put them to death, but he mingled their blood with the blood of the animal sacrifices that they were offering in the temple. In other words, he desecrated the temple sacrifices with the blood of these Jews that he had massacred. Obviously, this would have been something that would have been a notorious act on Pilate’s part, and Jesus appears to assume here that his disciples will have heard about this massacre (about this tragedy). His point in bringing the event up is to say this: “Do you assume that just because these Galileans were killed by Pilate that they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” In other words, what Jesus is saying here is that the suffering and death of these Galileans was not necessarily a result of their own sinfulness. This was a pretty common assumption that he has to correct in the 1st Century AD. We’ll see him do this on several occasions, like in

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

the Gospel of John when the Apostles will say they see the man more born blind and they say, “Who’s sinned? This man or his parents?” Jesus says, “Well actually neither of them sinned. God has allowed this to take place for some greater purpose.” In our day, we have the opposite problem. People will assume there is no connection whatsoever between sin and suffering. In Jesus’ day, it was the other way around. If people saw someone who had experienced a tragedy or suffering or death, they would assume “Ah well, they must have done something wrong and they’re getting their punishment now through this physical tragedy or this physical suffering.” And so Jesus says, “No, that’s not the case in this instance. However, unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” Now, I have to say, this is one of Jesus’ less popular sayings. You’ll see bumper stickers of the golden rule: “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”, or of John 3:16: “God so love the world that he sent his only begotten son.” I’ve never seen a bumper sticker of Luke 13:3, “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” This is not one of Jesus’ more popular sayings, but he reiterates it twice with a second example of the tower of Silo’am. It’s obviously something very significant.

He moves into a second example of a tragedy, in this case it’s an accident, it’s not a massacre. Evidently there were people working on repairing the tower of Silo’am, which was in Jerusalem — you might recall again from the Gospel of John, he mentions the pool of Silo’am. So evidently the tower was a tower nearby that pool and it was being rebuilt or maybe it just crumbled and fell, but apparently it was such a traumatic event that 18 people died in the collapse of this tower. And so Jesus says, “Do you think the people who died in that tragedy were worse sinners than everyone else in Jerusalem?” Obviously (again) the answer is no, but then Jesus affixes to that statement, “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” So, what’s he getting at here? Well, again, the thrust of these two examples appears to be that on the one hand, you should not assume that physical death is necessarily the result of a particular sin. On the other hand, there’s a kind of riddle built in here where Jesus is saying, “If you don’t repent, you too will perish.” Now, this is a classic example of how Jesus’ questions are often paradoxical; they are not clear in what they mean. They are deliberately phrased as riddles or parables that are meant to make you think. If he’s saying, “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish”, it would seem to contradict what he just said. If death is not necessarily a result of sin, then why will I perish if I don’t repent? Well the answer to the riddle is he’s not talking primarily about physical death. He’s talking about spiritual death. He’s talking about being cut off from God. He’s talking about what he says elsewhere in the gospels, the famous saying, “What does it profit a man, if he gains his life but

loses his soul?” Wait, what does he mean? How can you lose your soul without losing your life? Well he’s talking about not the loss of physical life but as kind of spiritual death through being excluded from the kingdom of God. That’s the perishing he’s describing here.

And before we move on, I would note here that what Jesus is referring to here, although we don’t have any evidence either of the tower of Silo’am or of the massacre of the Galileans by Pilate from other historical records, there’s really no reason to doubt the truth of this event, especially when we know that this accords perfectly with the kind of person Pilate was. I just want to add this (just to kind of give you a sense of the realism of Jesus’ words here): In the 1st Century Jewish author Philo of Alexandria (who’s actually a contemporary of Jesus), he has a book called the “Embassy to Gaius” in which he describes the kind of person Pilate was, and it matches up exactly with what we see not just in the gospels as a whole with regard to Jesus’ passion, but with regard to this specific episode Jesus is describing here of Pilate not just killing Galileans, but actually desecrating the temple and mingling their blood with the sacrifices. Listen to this quote from Philo of Alexandria:

[Pilate] feared lest they might in reality go on an embassy to the emperor, and might impeach him with respect to other particulars of his government, *in respect of his corruption, and his acts of insolence, and his rapine, and his habit of insulting people, and his cruelty, and his continual murders of people untried and uncondemned, and his never ending, and gratuitous, and most grievous inhumanity.*²

So that’s Philo’s description of Pontius Pilate from the 1st Century AD. The idea that Pilate was cruel, that he was inhumane, that he would execute people without trial or who were in fact innocent, accords perfectly with what Jesus is describing here in Luke 13 about the massacre of the Galileans. It just points out the fact that these two examples that Jesus’ is using here, of the tower of Silo’am and the Galileans massacre, would have been well known and would have driven home this whole question of the relationship between suffering and sin, and sin and death: “What is the causal relationship here?”

Now, if you have any doubts about the spiritual death and the meaning of Jesus’ words there, you just have to look at the third example that he gives in Luke 13.

² Philo, Embassy to Gaius 302

This is the parable of the fig tree (of the barren fig tree). This makes really clear that he's talking about spiritual realities here. We've seen elsewhere in the gospel the idea of a tree and its fruit being used as a symbol for repentance and good works. So if you recall, early in the gospel in the description of the baptism of John the Baptist, John himself uses this imagery in Luke 3:9. John the Baptist (at the beginning of the gospel) said, "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the tree, every tree therefore that doesn't bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." So what is John referring to in context? Well, in context, the tree obviously symbolizes individual sinners who are in need of repentance and who need to bear fruit through good works. What John here is saying is that if a tree doesn't bear good fruit it's going to be cut down and thrown into the fire. The fire there being a symbol for the unquenchable fire that Jesus talks about, what we call Hell, this separation from God and exclusion from the kingdom of God.

So with that saying of John the Baptist in mind, if we go back to Luke 13, Jesus here is clearly giving a parable in which the fig tree represents the individual person, the lack of fruit represents a lack of repentance and the good works that are the signs of repentance. What Jesus is saying here is, Look, if any farmer has a fruit tree in his yard (or in his vineyard), and after a few years it isn't bearing any fruit, the natural response of a farmer is going to be to cut it down because it's just taking up space and it's drawing out the richness of the soil. So, in this case though we see that one of the servants in the vineyard asks for mercy (basically), asks for a little more time. He says, "Look, if it doesn't bear fruit within a year, then you can cut it down, but in the meantime let me dig a trench around it, let me fertilize it and see if I can stimulate it to bear some good fruit." In this case, what Jesus is doing is he's using these different examples to drive home the point to his audience that the call of repentance is urgent. You don't know how much time you're going to have. The Galileans didn't know that they were going to be massacred by Pilate when they went up to the temple to offer their sacrifice. The people around the tower of Silo'am didn't know that it was going to collapse on them and that they were going to die. The fig tree here that isn't bearing fruit needs to realize that it doesn't know how long it has until its time is up. And so what Jesus is doing is he's giving us a sense of the urgency for two things: first, to repent, to turn away from sin, to turn away from the life of sin, to turn away from the things that draw us away from God and that render us incapable of bearing good fruit. And then secondly, to actually strive toward bearing the good fruit that comes from repentance. So repentance (this is really important) isn't just being depicted as sorrow for sin, it also involves a change of life whereby a tree that was once barren and didn't bear any fruit will

begin to bear good fruit, that is the fruits of repentance; the fruits of turning away from sin and turning to God.

Although we are focused on the Gospel of Luke and not on the Gospel of John, I can't help but think about a striking parallel to this parable in the Gospel of John. It's the parable of the vine and the branches. In John 15, Jesus uses a similar image where he talks about "I am the vine and you are the branches, and every branch in me that doesn't bear fruit will be cut down (or cut off) and thrown into the fire." This is a classic example, these two parables together, John 15, the vine and the branches and then Luke 13, the parable of the barren fig tree, are classic examples of the fact that the doctrine that you'll find in some protestant Christian circles of "Once saved, always saved" is just a false teaching. That is not what Jesus said. He's very clear that not only do we have to be joined to him, we also have to bear fruit, the fruits of repentance that are going to be manifest in good works. Otherwise, what's going to happen to the fig tree? It's going to be cut down or (in the case of John's gospel) the branch will be cut off from the vine and then cast into the fire, which is a symbol for separation from God, eternal separation from God in the fires of Gehenna. Luke 13:1-9, these three sayings of Jesus, are really sobering. They fit into the Lenten season perfectly because they are stark reminders to us of the need to turn away from sin and to turn to God, and to do good works in Christ through God's grace (always), but bearing fruit, the fruits of repentance.

That's the meaning of the gospel for this week. If in the third week of Lent you haven't seen any changes in your life or if you're starting to get lax on the spiritual disciplines that you took up, the penances that you took up in the beginning of the season, now's a good time to renew those and especially to examine your conscious and the question of "What are the sins in my life that I need to turn from so I can bear fruit? So that I can not be the barren fig tree of Luke 13, or so that I can not be like the Galileans or the people of Jerusalem whose life was cut short and was caught off guard and not able to use the time that is given to me to bear the fruit of repentance?"

With that said, let's go back to the Old Testament reading for today. Once again, I will continue to stress the fact that the Old Testament reading here is not chosen according to the principle of harmony or typology, it's chosen in accordance with the principle of salvation history; it's meant to take us through salvation history. The last week in Lent we were looking at the call of Abraham and the covenant by which God promises to give Abram a multitude of descendants and to give him the

Promised Land. Today we're looking at the appearance of God to Moses on Mt. Sinai. We move from the book of Genesis to the book of Exodus. In Exodus 3 we have a very famous (the most famous) theophany (or, appearance of God), really, in the bible as a whole and that is the revelation to Moses in the burning bush and the unveiling (so-to-speak) of the name of God. So let's read this famous story and reflect on it together. Exodus 3:1-8 says this:

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Mid'ian; and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and lo, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, "I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt." When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!"

I am not going to try to do the "God voice" so you can add that in yourself.

And he said, "Here am I." Then he said, "Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Per'izzites, the Hivites, and the Jeb'usites.

And if you skip down to verse 13:

Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I am has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,

has sent me to you': this is my name for ever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.

We could do a whole hour just walking through this famous passage of the burning bush. It is a very, very important passage in the history of salvation. For our purposes here, I just want to highlight a few points: first, the theophany of God and the burning bush. I've mentioned in other lectures, other videos, that whenever you see supernatural fire, whether it's the pillar of fire (the glory cloud) or the smoking fire pot that appears to Abraham, supernatural fire is always a sign of the divine presence. It's a sign of God's miraculous appearance to either a prophet or his people. When Moses sees a bush that's burning but not consumed, this is obviously not an ordinary flame. It's not an ordinary fire. It's a supernatural manifestation of God's presence, and he recognizes it as such, that's why he is afraid to look at God, because he knows that he cannot see God and live. It's also why God says, "Take off your shoes because the place you're on is holy ground." Holy, in Hebrew, *Kadosh*, means "set apart". It's a term that's used for the temple or the sanctuary, or the innermost part of the tabernacle: the holy of holies. What does that mean? It means that this place is set apart, it's sanctified, it's consecrated by the presence of the Lord, by a special presence of God. Basically, on top of this mountain, Moses is (kind of like) entering into a natural temple or natural sanctuary. The mountain itself is a place where heaven and earth meet, where God has appeared.

In the context of standing on holy ground, God comes to Moses and commissions him to go to the people of Israel and to be their deliver, to be his instrument in setting them free from slavery to Pharaoh. And in the context of that commission, Moses asks a really practical question which is, "Well if I go and tell them the God of your fathers has sent me to you, what name am I going to give them?" At that time, the names of deities was a very important thing. In a polytheistic context, in other words, in the context of multiple gods and goddesses, which god or which goddess you're talking about is very crucial, and the Egyptians were polytheists. They believed in multiple Gods, and the Israelites have been living amongst the people of Egypt for 400 years. So Moses says, "Well what name will I give them?" And what's interesting about this passage is, although, we describe it as God giving his name (singular) to Moses, he actually gives him multiple names. So it's kind of interesting, and each one of them is significant in revealing some aspect of who God is. The most important one is, obviously the first, which is, "I am who I am." What does that mean? Well, this name reveals the nature of God as the eternal one. In ancient Egypt you would have had "The God of the river Nile" or "The Sun

God”, or various gods that were associated with specific aspects of the physical world, which are created realities, like the Nile River, or a mountain, or the sun. When God reveals his name to Moses and says “I am who I am”, what he’s showing Moses is that he simply “is”. He has no beginning, he has no end; he’s not the God of some particular place, or some particular thing, or even some particular power. He is the one who is being itself (as St. Thomas Aquinas will go to explain the name here), and to the extent that the name reveals who someone is, their nature, so too God taking the name “I am who I am”, reveals that he is the one God, the ground of being, the source of all that is; he is eternal, the eternal one.

In this case, God simply shortens that and says, “Tell them ‘I am’ has sent me to you”. It’s kind of an abbreviated form of “I am who I am”. This will appear elsewhere in the Bible; in the Greek it will be translated as *Ego eimi*, I am, and we’ll see Jesus himself (in the gospels) take that divine name and make it his own name. Which again, “I am”, what does that mean? He’s the eternal one.

But that’s not the only names that are given here. God also says, “Tell them that the Lord, the God of your fathers has sent you.” Now in this case, whenever you see the word “The LORD” in all capital letters in your English bible (L-O-R-D all caps), that is a translation of the Hebrew “Tetragrammaton”. *Tetra* means “four”, *grammaton* means “letters”, so the four letters: *YHWH* in Hebrew (there are no consonants written in the text), the sacred name of God. Which, in ancient Judaism at the time of Jesus, was so holy that it would not even be pronounced. So whenever ancient scribes would write this out (this is interesting), some of the ancient manuscripts we have, when they would write out (even Greek translations of the scripture), when they would get to God’s name, these ancient Jewish translations, they would switch and they would write in ancient Hebrew letters “YHWH”, because the name was so sacred that they didn’t even translate it into Greek, they would just write those four letters.

In this case, what matters is that that name, “The LORD” (what we translate as “The Lord”) literally the Hebrew, it’s a little obscure but the best translation of it, is “He who is” — based off of the Hebrew verb for “to be”. So again, it has the same meaning as “I am who I am” or “I am”, it’s pointing out the fact that the God to whom Moses is speaking is the one God, being itself, the source of all existence. That’s who God is in himself, he simply “is”. However, there’s one last name. That’s not the final name God gives. The final name he gives is *Elohim*. Whenever you see the word “God”, “G-O-D” in your English bible, it’s an English translation

of the Hebrew word *Elohim*, which isn't a name as much as a noun; it means a deity. It gets translated as *Deus* in Latin. Here he says, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob". So one name reveals who God is in himself, "I am", he simply "is", he has been for all eternity and he will be for all eternity. Before even the first creature was created, the first angel was made, God was "I am". But in time, and in salvation history, this God is also in relation to us. And in that sense, he can be referred to as "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." So one name reveals who God is in himself, the other reveals who God is in relation to us, humanity, and in relation to creatures in salvation history. Sorry to use all these terms, but it's helpful, theologians in the tradition have referred to these two words as *theologia* and *oikonomia*: theology and economy. Theology has to deal with who God is in himself, economy (*oikonomia*) doesn't have to do anything with money, it has to do with who God is in relationship to humanity. We need to understand both of those realities about God. Unlike the Egyptians, they thought of these gods as just creatures who related to the world, who were (in a sense) almost part of the world. That's not who the God of Israel is. He is God from all eternity. He is the one God in himself who existed before anything was ever created. On the other hand, he's not an absentee God. He's also a God who wants to enter into a covenant with us, who wants to have a relationship with us, who enters into a covenant with Abraham as the beginning (so-to-speak) of that plan of salvation that he has with reference to Israel and the Promised Land, and all those promises we've seen over this story of the Lenten season. It's very powerful for us to remember that both of those aspects of God are true. He's both eternal, but he's not absentee. He's in relation with us; he wants to have a covenant with us.

So, the psalm for the day again moves us, it gives us a window as to how we are to respond to this revelation. Verse 1 of the psalm is "Bless the LORD, o my soul" and there again, the word "The LORD" is the revelation of God's name. Bless he who is, the God who is being itself. And, in verse 8 of the psalm, it says that this same Lord, the eternal one, "is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." In other words, he's a God who loves his creatures, who loves humanity, and who wants to deliver and to save us. Both those things are important to remember as we journey through the Gospel of Luke toward Calvary during this season of Lent.

In closing, I'd just like to end with one more insight from the catechism, because I think, at least in my experience as a teacher, Jesus' words on repentance from Luke 13 for today, they can be kind of difficult for people to take in. Even just the word

repent, in contemporary society that word gets associated in secular context with people who stand on street corners and shout that the end of the world is near and everyone needs to repent. It gets associated with a kind of Christianity that might seem fanatical or judgmental or angry or whatnot. I just want to be clear here that the meaning of the word repentance, what does it actually mean? If you understand what it means, it shouldn't be something to be afraid of. It shouldn't be a negative thing. It's actually a very powerful and positive thing. And I love the definition of repentance from the Catechism of The Catholic Church, paragraph 1431. Listen to what the catechism says about what repentance is and what it means:

Interior repentance is a *radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end of sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed*. At the same time it entails the desire and resolution to change one's life, with hope in God's mercy and trust in the help of his grace. This conversion of heart is accompanied by a salutary pain and sadness which the Fathers called *animi cruciatus* (affliction of spirit) and *compunctio cordis* (repentance of heart).

Notice in this passage from the catechism, what does repentance involve? A radical reorientation of our whole life, a return to God with all of our heart, and end to sin, turning away from evil. Are those good things? Is it good to turn away from evil? Is it good to radically reorient our life toward God? Is it good to turn to him with our whole heart and our whole mind? Yeah. Is it good to seek an end of evil? Yes. How many of us would not like evil to be driven out of our lives? How many of us don't want to change, to be better people, to turn away from the things that we do that hurt others and hurt ourselves? This "repentance" should be one of the most popular words in the Bible, because it means turning away from evil and turning to goodness. It means breaking the chains of sin and living a life of freedom and joy and happiness that Christ came to give us. "I came that you might have life and have it abundantly." I think the part that's difficult for us is that last part, "repugnance towards the evil actions we've committed". It's hard for us sometimes to just admit that we've done wrong, to learn to hate the things we've done that are wrong. It's especially difficult when you're young and proud, I think as you get older it starts to get easier, as you look back on your life, to see the ways you've wounded others and to actually have sorrow about those things and to want to stop. I hope that's what happens as we grow old, that's at least what should happen as we gain some perspective on life.

But I just want to bring up the fact that both these things, the affliction of spirit and repentance of heart, those are healthy, human reactions to sin and evil and things we do in our lives that are wrong. We should all feel that way about sin. So although the word “repentance” has kind of gotten a bad rap, I think, when we understand what it really means, a desire to change our lives for the better, a desire to turn away from that which is evil, and that which is harmful to ourselves and others, there is every reason for us to heed the words of Jesus in this week’s gospel. Unless you repent, unless you change, unless you convert your heart to God, unless you turn away from evil, unless you stop doing things that harm yourself and harm others, unless you learn to hate the sins in your own heart more than you hate everyone else’s sins, you’re going to perish too; you’re not going to bear good fruit. And God put us in this world so that we can bear good fruit, so that we can love him above all things and so that we can love our neighbors as ourselves. That’s really what Lent is all about. It’s a time to fertilize the soil, cut off the bad branches and to try to bear more fruit through the grace of God.