

## Urgent Message: Turn to God & Live

I think it is safe to say that we live in an age of instant information.

In the not too distant past,

newspapers were the main form of communication about  
local, national and worldly events.

But anymore, they seem slow and out of date.

We get information through the internet,

our phones and text messages as soon as something important happens –  
whatever that something is –  
we get the news instantly.

But I tell you what – at times that can drive me crazy.

I can hardly ever tell what is important  
and what is just noise or even an annoyance.

It seems like most every news item comes with a strong sense of urgency.

That even happens in emails sometimes, right?

Do any of you have co-workers or friends  
that have the setting on their email  
to always flag every message

with the red exclamation mark

that some programmer at Microsoft

has decided is now our universal symbol for urgent?

If every message is urgent, how do I know which one really is?

If everything is urgent,

wouldn't that imply that nothing is urgent?

This is the kind of frivolous stuff that keeps me awake at night.

I know, it's really sad.

I think this lack of importance or urgency has seeped into our culture.

Without any distinction between what is urgent  
and what isn't really urgent,  
every piece of information seems to get lumped  
into the same category of "I'll get to it when I have time."

Or as we say in my family the "round to it" pile.

As in the "it will get done or get my attention  
when I get 'round to it.' "

But not everything fits in the "round to it" pile.

There are still a few items whose sense of importance and urgency  
rise to the top of the pile and cry out for our attention.

And one of them has been brought to our awareness  
in our two Scripture lessons for this morning

- even if on the surface, that may not seem obvious.

Our first lesson for today was most of chapter 55 from Isaiah's prophecies.

Now this prophecy or maybe we can think of it as a brief sermon,  
was written to address a group of Ancient Israelites –  
good hearted, God fearing people that were living in exile.

They had been kicked out of their land.

They had been forcibly removed from their homes

and were striving to still live as God's people in a foreign land.

Isaiah's words are God's message to this faithful group.

This message is given

in order to help them make sense of their living  
situation. Perhaps an ancient look at bad things happening to good people.

So God's message to these people living in exile are words of comfort,

words of hope.

Even words of instruction and encouragement

that seek to restore dignity to these people in exile.

God reminds them that he has made promises  
and will keep those promises.

He reminds them that he is still their god

– the one true, Holy Lord –

as opposed to the gods of the people they are living around  
– and that he has glorified them.

Not only is God their Lord,

but he lets these stranded people know

that through the promise he has made with them,  
he will use them to attract other nations.

God will use this faithful remnant to expand his kingdom.

God is making them a witness for all people to see.

And through this the Lord proclaims his mercy,  
his great ability to pardon,  
his readiness to receive all people.

Verse six invites all people to “Seek the Lord.”

Verse seven contains the phrase, “Let them return.”

God is gracious and loving,  
eagerly watching and encouraging all people to turn to him.

To turn to the Lord trusting that we will be received with grace and mercy.

That we can turn to the Lord and receive forgiveness.

That we are created to be in relationship with him.

Another word to describe turning to the Lord

or returning to the Lord as the case may be is to talk about repentance.

The root of the word for repentance

In our gospel for today implies a turning.

As in a physical turning to God.

When we are invited to repent we are invited to turn ourselves to God.

Not just our hearts and emotions,

but our entire person, including our bodies,

our actions, our thoughts, our speech – everything.

God cares about it all.

And in the passage from Luke,

Jesus doesn't mince his words.

Did you hear those difficult words in verse 3 of our gospel lesson

that were repeated in verse 5?

“Unless you repent, you will all perish.”

Yikes, even if we are tempted to skip through verse 3 quickly,

we get hit with it again just two verses later.

This can be a difficult phrase for us to wrap our minds around.

“Unless you repent, you will all perish.”

And yet at the same time God is gracious and merciful;

slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

This is the same God

who keeps his promises and abundantly forgives?

The same God who makes his people a witness for all nations.

As we read through these difficult words it is helpful to keep in mind

that God is the source of all life.

Repentance turns us to God.

God calls us to repent

because he is gracious and merciful,  
calling out to us with steadfast love and abundant forgiveness.

Turning to God is turning to life.

When Jesus said these words he was speaking to a crowd of people.

Some people in the crowds were telling Jesus about an issue  
they were trying to make sense out of.

Really, this problem isn't too unlike events we might hear about in the news,  
although the times and places have clearly changed a bit  
since first century Palestine.

Anyway, the problem was that several people had been killed by Pilate  
because of their religious practices.

Remember, Pilate was a government official  
who will eventually play a large role in Jesus' own death.

Jesus asks the crowd,

did they think the people killed by Pilate  
suffered this fate because they were sinners?

Then he compares their situation with an accident that happened in Jerusalem.

A tower - we could think of it as a large structure  
that might be used as a lookout  
tall enough for someone to see an entire vineyard or maybe a  
farm - So this tower in Jerusalem fell and 18 people were killed.

That's awful, right? A terrible accident, even by today's standards.

And Jesus asks if the people were in the accident  
because they were sinners.

You see, there was a widely held belief that if one sinned abundantly  
then their life would be cut off.

But Jesus is comparing people that were killed  
practicing acts of worship  
and people that were killed in an accident.

The point he is trying to make is that life is fleeting.

Death is unpredictable.

We cannot predict the end life  
like we can a storm or the changing of the seasons.

Everything we have is a gift.

And who gives that gift? God.

Jesus uses these two situations with terrible, awful endings  
to share with the crowds an urgent message about grace and mercy,  
life and forgiveness.

Jesus invites us to repent, to turn to God,  
to receive mercy and pardon  
so that we can have the gifts of abundant life now.

So that we can live in relationship with God and with one another.

If not, we fall victim relying on ourselves.

We may turn to other things, even other people expecting them to give life.  
And we will be disappointed every time.

Speaking of disappointments, some of you, like me,  
may have heard reports in the news recently  
about prominent Christian leaders speaking out  
against the people in Haiti and Chile  
and their struggles with the recent earthquakes.

I would guess the same ones

said nasty things about New Orleans after Katrina showed up.

If you are lucky enough to not know what I'm talking about,

some folks have publicly blamed the natural disasters

on the countries' state of sinfulness.

According to this passage from Luke,

I think we can say that isn't the case.

That isn't who God is.

Our lives are all darkened by the impact of sin.

We have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory (Romans 3:23).

God's answer to that isn't to send disasters,

but to invite us back into his arms.

For us to turn back to him, over and over again.

And let's not forget that coupled

with this urgent message about repentance, life and mercy,

Jesus shares the parable of the barren fig tree.

From this parable,

we get a glimpse at the willingness of God to stoop down and help us.

As Isaiah reminded us earlier:

God's ways are not our ways, they are so much better!

And he continues to persevere,

to show up for us,

to beckon to us to return.

God's patience is also not our patience.

(And we can all be thankful God's patience isn't mine! )

He comes to us again and again,

just as he comes to each of his children in the waters of baptism.

Calling us to him, making us his own  
and then calling us back, again and again.

This repetitive turning to God  
makes me wonder if many of us feel like that barren fig tree  
at different times in our lives.

I know I go through seasons of life  
where it feels like I haven't produced anything worth a hoot.  
Sometimes our faith life and congregation life together can feel that way, too.

The good news for us is this urgent message we hear from Jesus.  
This urgent invitation to repent to live into the newness of life  
to which we are all invited.

Like the gardener in the parable,  
Jesus is at work on our behalf.  
Through his death and resurrection,  
Jesus has paved the way for us to be in a relationship with God  
and freed us for healthy relationships with one another.

Like the gardener Jesus pleads on our behalf,  
and puts effort into tending for us and our health.  
Even when that means doing some unpleasant things  
that may feel like we're being uprooted and fertilized.

Because of all God does for us we are invited to respond.

We are called to turn ourselves back to God.  
We are invited to be God's witnesses in this world.  
Not just for nations to come to,  
but for individuals to come to us, too.

That may mean we reprioritize our time.

We may be called to set aside time to pray for guidance  
and to pray for people in our lives.

During this season of Lent,

we are particularly reminded of our areas of faith growth.

Perhaps we are invited to pray for God to work on our roots  
and to make us be healthier, more able to bear fruit.

Perhaps we are also invited to share his message:

Turn to God and live

A message for God's people in exile,  
the crowds around Jesus and for you and me today.

We are invited to share this message: Turn to God and live

with a sense of urgency

in such a way that it can be heard

above the clamor of everything else going on around us.

Because this is the most important news we receive.

God is the source of life and he gives of himself freely.

For that we can all cry out, "Thanks be to God!"