

3rd Sunday of Lent, C

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Siloam was not the last tower to fall, and Pilate was not the last to hurt or kill another person. Tyrants and towers are a reality of this world and our lives. They come in all sorts of events, ways, and circumstances. Sometimes, it is intentional; other times, it is accidental. Sometimes, it is of human origin; other times, it is the way of nature. Accidents, disease, crime, divorce, famine, poverty, war, earthquakes, tornados, and tsunamis. Those are but a few of the tyrants and towers in this world.

Whenever and wherever tyrants act, and towers fall, we are faced with the reality that life is fragile, unpredictable, and often tragic. In those moments, we are often quick, too quick, to seek and offer easy explanations. **“They got what they deserved.” “God has a plan.” “Everything happens for a reason.” “He is in a better place.” “There is a lesson to be learned here.” “This was God’s will.” “Someday, when we get to heaven, we will know why.”**

Jesus has heard explanations like these from the people who tell him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices. It sounds a lot like they are saying that something bad happened because they were bad people. To this kind of thinking and all the other simplistic, trite, and unhelpful responses in the face of tragedy, Jesus says, **“But I tell you.”**

That is not who God is or how God acts. Actions and choices have natural consequences. Sometimes, they are tragedy and suffering. Other times, they are prosperity and joy. Good things happen to both good and bad people. Bad things happen to both good and bad people. Tyrants, towers, and God show no partiality. That is more than clear in Jesus's statement, **“if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did.”**

“If you do not repent....” I suspect that’s not what the people wanted or expected to hear from Jesus when they told him how Pilate killed the Galilean worshippers. I cannot imagine that Jesus’ story about the eighteen killed when the tower of Siloam fell and then his words, **“If you do not repent,”** made things any better.

Imagine that one day you call or come by the office to tell me that your son is getting a divorce, that your best friend has just been diagnosed with cancer, that your mom has died, or your husband just lost his job. You would not be happy if my response was, **“If you do not repent....”** Your next phone call or visit would probably be with Bishop Talley. **“Can you believe what he said? How could he say that to me? What are you going to do about this?”**

Let’s just be honest about this. Jesus’ words are not all that helpful. They offer no consolation, explanation, or comfort. **“If you do not repent...”** is not what we want to hear. Sometimes, however, it is what we need to hear. Today’s gospel is not about pastoral care. Jesus, to state the obvious, is not acting as a pastor. He is a pure prophet.

Prophets speak hard truths, truths we often do not want to hear. Jesus is looking with insight into our condition, making a diagnosis, and offering a corrective. Prophetic words challenge us. Sometimes, they scare us. Other times, they make us feel guilty or angry. They always grab our attention and show us the way to new life.

“If you do not repent, you will all perish as they did.”

Tyrants act, and towers fall. Now is the time to examine the fig tree of our life. Where is our life bearing fruit? Where is it not? Where do we need to spend time, care, and energy nurturing life and relationships? What are our priorities, and do they need adjusting? Who or what orients our life? Are we growing, or are we **“wasting the soil”** in which we have been planted?

We are right to hear urgency and necessity in Jesus’ words. This is not because God is vindictive but because life is short, precious, and sacred. Jesus is more concerned with why people do not fully live than he is with explaining why people die, tyrants act, or towers fall. Everyone dies, but not all truly live.

The poet, Mary Oliver, states this beautifully in the last lines of **“The Summer Day.”**

“Doesn’t everything die at last and too soon?

**Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?”**

Oliver's question is at the heart of Jesus' call to repentance. Her question underlies and guides our Lenten journey. Repentance is the means to reclaiming the **“one wild and precious life”** entrusted to us. Repentance is the way to live, the way of becoming most authentically who we are and who, at the deepest level, we long to be. What might repentance look like in your life? Ultimately, repentance is about choosing to live and live fully. So, choose, and if you find you have made the wrong choice, choose again.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It is never too late. **“One more year,”** the gardener told the owner. That is not about time but about forgiveness, grace, love, and second chances. So, **“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” Amen.**