

*A Matter of Life and Death* [Luke 13:3]

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During Lent, Christians commit to experience their unique relationship with God. This annual sojourn relates to the revelation of both the human nature and spiritual calling. Some days call our attention to the human part – an urgent call to penance: *you will all come to the same end unless you reform or unless you repent you will all also perish*. Penance for many people living in 2019 is from the dark ages and an outdated Christianity.

Jesus reminded his hearers of the urgency and importance. It is not something invented by an ecclesiastical system. It is a specific command from Jesus. The word, *penance*, conjures up all sorts of ideas. For Some it is a discipline undertaken willingly to get beyond self or to perform better. An elder in one of my congregations in his pre-ordination paper wrote, *It is "I" taking conscious control over my humanization process. It is a set of guidelines which enables me to be more present to myself and to be more of a human being*. If you were preparing yourself for ordination to the office of either a Ruling or Teaching elder, how do you think you would write this statement? Many see it as a series of privatizations imposed upon self for the sake of suffering. This is meant to reassure them by giving them a good conscience, at least for the moment. Which ever thought you may entertain as a means of attaining some model of perfection, or as a brand of masochism, penance seems to be a bit off an absurdity in the world of 2019. In our Scripture penance is an order Jesus issued. The Greek word, *metanoia*, means *repentance; turning away from sins*-note the plural; *turning back to God*. The way Jesus gives this order in its context, the topic is initiated by the repression exercised by Pilate and an accident that cost the lives of 18 people. Jesus recalls an important event to the listeners. These events have no great significance in themselves and don't imply the victims are morally culpable. But they aroused an emotion and disturbed those who witnessed the event. Jesus used their psychological impact to help; they raise some questions about themselves-and now about us.

The threat they sensed in these catastrophes was real and at the same time, symbolic. If they don't do penance, they will perish. Penance or repentance is a matter of life and death. The words of Jesus are disturbing. Then there is the parable that follows. It is the one of the fig tree that should have been bearing fruit but for the past three years it had not. The owner wanted to cut it down but the vinedresser urged him to wait. He agreed he would hoe around it and add fertilizer and perhaps it will give what the owner wants within a year.

This tells us that while penance is a matter of life and death, although it is a moment of judgment, the Lord is patient and he will help us to meet the conditions required for us to return to him. He will not abandon us, because he is patient, active and watchful over us. His tireless kindness and watchfulness are the themes of the text in Exodus and Paul's letter to the Corinthian Church.

Moses was known as the liberator and legislator of the Israelites. He never attained the role of a prophet and was still an unknown living in the desert. On Mt. Horeb he encountered an astonishing sight. He saw a bush that was engulfed in flames but it wasn't burned up. Cautiously he approached to take a closer look and then someone called out his name and told him to show respect for that spot. Moses hid his face because he was terrified. Then the Lord spoke to Moses again and he became terrified: *I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt. I have come to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians and lead them into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.* Moses wanted to understand the situation, so he asked the voice who spoke, *who are you?* *I am who I am*, God replied. The living God wanted to show an active concern for His people. Israel was the sterile fig tree which Jesus referred to and which God takes charge over.

God says who He is, but He does so in a mysterious way. It is as if the name He wants to be known and adored by was designed to conceal His mysteriousness rather than reveal it. He refuses to be an object of idle curiosity but shows Himself to be an active and attentive presence. His words to Moses confirm this: *I have witnessed; I have heard; I know well; therefore I have come down; I will send you.* He said enough to make it clear that He is the only living, true God. Above all, He presents himself as the one who is taking the initiative to ransom and create His people. Then He gave Moses the power and the ability to do all this in His name.

In the Corinthian letter, Paul shows us how God carried out this work. In a compelling and striking summary, he recalls the main events of the sojourn in the desert. He pointed out how God cared for them with great solicitude. *By the cloud and the sea all of them were baptized*, he wrote. The cloud was a sign of God's presence. The Red Sea which they crossed miraculously has remained a symbol of their liberation from Egypt and their relationship to God. It is with thanks to the Lord the Israelite people exist and owe everything to Him to this very day.

People were baptized and then fashioned into a people by God's action and they were nourished with food and water. They remained in the desert for 40 years. They were fed with manna and Moses drew water from a rock to quench their thirst. All of these things God did for His people. This is how He cared for the sterile fig tree.

Paul continued: *Yet we know that God was not pleased with most of them, for they were struck down in the desert.* He explained that so many of the Israelites failed because they preferred their own way. Once again, it was a rejection of God's authority. What more could God have done for them? He created them as a people, He gave them food and drink during their journey in the desert and all He asked in return was that they place their love and trust in Him. They refused to deny themselves and place their dependence upon the Lord and the result was suffering and death.

I believe we are able to appreciate the nature of repentance as revealed to us. Because of today's Scripture lesson we can be more readily able to come and be penitent. We are to be people in repentance, a people doing penance by being willing to depend on

the Lord and put ourselves in tune with His designs. The opposite of penance is choosing oneself, preferring our own desires in lieu of God's. In short, this is a revolting against God. Everything comes from Him and it is He who knows everything in our lives. He is the only guide who can reveal the most fundamental values and help us live by them.

Realizing our special relationship with God helps us to discern the many and varied features of penance, and in particular, why Lent is a special opportunity for us to have a self-examination with the Lamb of God that took our sins upon Himself. When we realize this we can have a greater ability to come to Him. When we do, He enables us to have greater values in our faith life so we may receive and accept that which He offers. It is letting Him direct our lives and then our conforming to His will for us.

Outside this framework lies the nothingness of death. Everything that exists is realized by God. I believe this is the point Luke was making when he talked about the destroying angel. Paul draws the conclusions: *For all these reasons, let anyone who thinks s/he is standing upright watch out lest s/he fall.* After warning those who reject penance, we now have a warning, especially those who were convinced the first time and then that warning began to wane. One is in a precarious position when they think they are in good shape. That person may be on the verge of thinking they can rely on the self. They may be taken in by the delusion that their strength comes from within the self. They may reject the dependence which is the real ground of solidity and unrighteousness.

We are all as fig trees being tended by the Vinedresser. Allowing Him to do His job on us is what true penance is all about. Amen.

Prayer: God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, you met Moses at the mountain and made holy ground to beneath his feet. Through him you baptized your people into freedom and gave them food and drink. Remind us of our baptism through this holy season and renew our repentance that we too might stand in your holy presence on the day of resurrection, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.