

“Turn, Turn, Turn”  
 A Sermon by Angie Witmer based on Isaiah 55:1-9 and Luke 13:1-9  
 Plymouth Congregational UCC  
 Sunday, March 7, 2010

*“Do you think that those people—those Galileans—suffered or were murdered because they were worse sinners than other Galileans...”*

A more recent version of this story can be heard on the airwaves, on websites, in the newspapers almost daily as people ask questions like this:

“Do you think that those people—those Haitians—were crushed and killed in the earthquake because they were worse sinners...?”

And yet another version replaces the Galileans with the people from Chile, referring to the recent earthquake there. Or there’s the version that asks about the Ugandans who were wiped out in a mudslide—a whole village. 350 of them. “Do you think they were crushed and died because they were worse...”

I’m sure if I gave you a moment, you could come up with many, many more twists on the same theme: “Do you think...” or “What about...” questions have been around for generations.

Why? Why do we do that? Why do we go there? Judging people as if we know best, clucking our tongues and shaking our heads, muttering things like “Those who live by the sword die by the sword.” Maybe it’s true. There are certainly consequences to certain actions. The thing that throws a wrench into that theory, though, is that those who live by the hug seem to die by the sword, too...and when that happens, things feel a little out of whack. Our worlds are rocked. When bad things happen to good people, there has to be a reason. Right? Because, c’mon: bad things only happen to bad people. People who done something to deserve the worst kind of punishment. After all, there’s an order to the world. The laws of physics and all. Good people prosper. Bad people suffer.

Right?

Not so, Jesus says. Not at all. Stuff happens to everybody. It doesn’t matter who you are or how good you have (or haven’t) been, good stuff happens and bad stuff happens. Stuff happens. So instead of running around trying to figure out who’s to blame for all of the calamities in the world, pointing fingers and clucking tongues and thanking God that you’re not as bad as that sinner—why don’t you see this opportunity to take a good look at yourself and see how you’re doing here? How faithful have YOU been lately? Because here’s the deal: there’s no rhyme or reason to how tragedy strikes. So, yes. Be thankful that the tower didn’t fall on you and the earthquake didn’t hit your house. This time. You need to face facts here: you’re not above tragedy.

Unless you repent, you’ll die too. Unless you keep repenting, you’ll keep dying.

In case you hadn't figured it out yet, the Jesus in this story from Luke isn't the warm, fuzzy, comforting guy we picture with lambs at his side and kids on his lap. This is the "tell it like it is" Jesus: the guy who knows he's only got so much time left. He's headed to Jerusalem on a mission. So, on the way, he's reminding people that they've only got so much time left, too. Whether it's two days or a hundred years, our time on this Earth is limited. From ashes we come, to ashes we return—those aren't just ritual words that kick off this holy season of Lent. They are a reminder from Jesus, too: what are you going to do with the days left here on earth? Repent and live? Or stay as is and die?

Yes, it sounds a little harsh. But let's face it: Jesus is only calling it like he sees it. And what he sees isn't pretty: he sees a bunch of people who buy into the idea that health, wealth, and security meant that they were blessed by God...and that disaster was evidence of God's punishment. So Jesus feels the need to set the record straight and does so by saying, "Ummm...have you taken a good look at yourself lately? You're not safe because you're all that. Trust me on this one."

Now maybe you've jumped ahead of me here and are already making the connection that what Jesus told the folks back then is probably the same thing he'd say right now. And you're right. That would be my guess, anyway. And if that's the case, it's quite possible that some of you are already thinking: "Wait a minute. What have I got to repent for? I live a pretty good life. I'm here today, aren't I? I pledge. I volunteer my time. I'm a decent person. C'mon. Really? Repent? For what?"

Let's clear something up here: the word is repent. Not remorse. The two often get confused. Remorse is to feel guilt or shame about something...and sure, you can feel remorse when you repent but that's not really the point. At least that's not what I hear Jesus saying here. Repent isn't a feeling. It's an action. Jesus isn't saying, "Hey—go take a good look at yourself and then feel really bad about what a creep you've been." Not at all. In this story, Jesus seems to be saying, "Hey—why don't you take a good look at where you've separated from God and don't do that anymore. It's really not good for you. Or anybody else. Turn around. Turn to God. Turn to things that give life. And here...let me help."

Let me help. That's the second part of this story from Luke. Jesus knows—God knows—that for the most part we're really not doing so hot in the "fruit-bearing" department. Oh, we try. God knows we try, too. But on the whole, well...um...yeah. Not so much. We could use a little help. Fortunately, God knows that's the case and is willing to step in.

After he tells people to repent, Jesus tells this story about a tree that's supposed to be producing fruit. It's had every opportunity: it's been in the ground a long time. It's been cared for. But it's not doing its job. Right now, it appears that this tree is only taking up valuable space in the vineyard. Sure, it might have nice shiny leaves and beautiful, thick bark—it may actually be a very pretty tree (the story doesn't say, so we don't know) but the reality is that it's not holding up its end of the bargain. The landowner (and therefore, the tree's owner) takes one look that this tree and tells the gardener to cut it down. Get rid

of it. Ditch it. But the gardener stands up for the tree. “Just give it another chance,” he says. “Maybe it needs some extra attention. Some good fertilizer. A little pruning, perhaps. Some TLC. Why don’t you give me a year with this thing? I’ll help it out. Then we’ll talk...”

It doesn’t take a lot of deep reading here to make the connections: we’re the tree. Jesus is the gardener. We get another chance. And another. And another. And not only do we get another chance, but Jesus is saying, “You know, it looks like you’re having a tough time here being fruitful. Let me help.” Let me help.

It doesn’t make a lot of sense, does it? Anyone with any practical sense would agree with the landowner. That tree is taking up valuable space and resources—the smart thing to do would be to get rid of that worthless piece of wood and give it’s space to another tree.

But God doesn’t work that way. We are reminded in the scripture reading from Isaiah today—the one we read earlier in the service—that God abundantly pardons. God’s ways are not our ways. And God’s thoughts are not our thoughts. God obviously hasn’t bought into the whole efficient and effective style of world management. The tree stays. And not only does it stay, it gets some extra loving care, too.

Thank God. This would be one very sparsely populated world if common sense and productivity and efficiency were God’s style. But they’re not. God’s ways really aren’t our ways. God sees in us people with the potential to do amazing, great things. God sees us for who we really are—not the people we are running around pretending to be as we work so hard to impress everyone. God knows better. And really, so do we.

Deep down inside, we know better. We know that no matter how hard we try or how fast we run or how much money we spend, there will always be someone who is better looking with cooler toys and whiter teeth and tighter abs and better social skills just around the corner. Spending our money and our time and our energy to keep one step ahead, constantly working to out-do each other, and spinning in circles to trying to secure a pain-free, comfortable existence is really, really ridiculous. We know better. In our guts and our hearts we know better. And we hear Jesus remind of that today: stuff happens no matter who you are.

But we do these things anyway and still wonder why we feel so, well...off. It must be human nature. People have been acting this way for thousands of years. Way back in Isaiah’s day, God’s people were in exile. Living in a foreign land, feeling cut off from their home, forgetting who they were and to whom they belonged they started to conform and fit in to the local customs, turning their back on God. The further they turned away, the crazier they felt. It was killing their souls—they knew better. But they did it anyway.

Sound familiar? Well, let’s see what God told those folks. I’d bet the same advice would apply to us today. God says: “Listen carefully. Come close. I have something really important to ask you: are you spending your hard earned money on things that are fun for awhile but don’t keep you happy or satisfied in the long run? Are you running harder and

harder and faster and faster only to find that you're not really getting anywhere? Do you feel like there's something not quite right in your life—that things are a little 'off'—but you just can't put your finger on what's wrong? If you answered yes to any of these questions...have I got a deal for you! Come and eat. Come and drink. Come and live."

Yes, Isaiah seems to be giving us one of the first infomercials in recorded history: God has something that you'd be crazy to refuse for the low, low price of *nothing*. Unfortunately for us and for God, God's people have always had a thing for being a little crazy. Even so, God doesn't give up on us. God doesn't just walk away—instead, God gives us an invitation to come back home. To the feast of life. To be fed. To stop.

Stop. That's the first step in repenting, you know. You've got to stop going one way before you can go another. So do it. Stop. And then: listen to your life (to borrow a Frederick Buechner phrase). Really listen. That's the second step. Probably not as easy as the first step, but important none-the-less because if you really listen, you'll discover things that you have stuffed away—some deep desires and yearnings, hidden away somewhere from everybody because they just weren't popular, or they wouldn't earn you a living, or you'd never be anybody if you did those things, or if you did them people would talk. When you stumble across those things, pay attention. They will give you a clue to where the brokenness is in your life. And once you can see that your own life is a bit broken and messed up and separated from God, then you can recognize that you aren't any better or any worse than anyone else. You're just different. And just the same.

*Unless you repent...take a look at yourself...come to the table.*

The invitation is here for a full, abundant life. Again: repenting isn't about wallowing in all of the things you've done wrong and beating yourself up for all of the times you've caved to the pressure of the world, leaving God in the dust. Repenting is about fulfilling your roles as co-creator, joining together with God to bring love and peace and joy and justice into the world. Yes, you. Co-creator. With God. How amazing is that? So accept the invitation. Bloom where you're planted, I believe is the saying. Or, in this case, be fruitful where you're planted. Know that you don't have to be hungry and frazzled and thirsty and empty say 'yes' to God's invitation. Repent. Turn away from the things that suck your soul dry. Turn to God.

Amen.