

ASAP

Readings from the Old Testament: Isaiah 5:7; Micah 7:1

Reading from the Gospels: Luke 13:1-9

It's urgent! She said it's urgent! Can't wait! My reply is urgently needed. Rose Raya is pressing me for an answer ... **As Soon As Possible** Her email described her as a businesswoman from the heart of Southeast Asia currently working in the Republic of Burkina Faso, and she's in the business of (and I quote) "gold exportation (Or is it extortion)." Well, out of all the people in the world, Rose selected me, little ol' me, redneck preacher in the foreign mission field of cosmopolitan suburbia, to carry out her life's dream. If I reply in time with just a few bits of personal data and information, Rose will (again, I quote) "hand over the sum of 10.5 million dollar to you [that's me] for the help of orphanage homes in your country to fulfill my wish on earth." And get this. I get to keep half of the money so long as I send the rest to these as yet unidentified orphanage homes. Imagine - 5 million dollars! Zach, we may get those timpanies after all!

And look, Rose must be really nice because she signed it, "Yours faithfully." Wow! This new online ministry is having a far-reaching impact. I mean, Burkina Faso. It has to be legit, right? Think about it,

an Indonesian entrepreneur trading in West African gold and sending the proceeds to a stranger in North Carolina to distribute to unspecified orphanages thousands of miles from her home. Sounds about right, doesn't it? But I'd better act fast with proper urgency. **As Soon As Possible!** Wouldn't want that money to end up in Myers Park.

It's a tough choice, though, because I have about a hundred other offers, equally urgent. Muammar Gaddafi's daughter (who implies that we used to hang out together) is offering me 150 kilos of gold, but I only get to keep 30% of that. Or maybe I should go for the 40% of \$15 million from the laundered funds of a Chinese politician. Sophia Roben, who calls me Dearest One, says this is, like all the others, pretty urgent.

That's a lot to think about, but I had better think fast before they look for someone else. And yet, there are other voices calling for my prompt attention. One email comes with a countdown clock and those seconds are disappearing fast. I had better act quick because the price on those shoes is only going to last for another 2 hours, 37 minutes, and 49 seconds. Better order fast because you won't find prices this low until ... well, next week when they go on sale again. Of course, if I don't get the lawn mowed before dark, by tomorrow it will be so out of control I'll

have to rake it, and let's not forget the deadline for the newsletter, getting my teeth cleaned, the bulletin information, proof-reading a child's resume, the Session agenda, dealing with the tire pressure warning light on my dashboard, getting in the workout, deleting about 11,000 emails, the new season of Drive to Survive, and ... oh yeah, that whole sermon thing.

Some days, a lot of days, life's soundtrack seems to be that Foreigner song. Remember? "You know it's urgent, urgent, Emergency." *(Although I don't think the band was singing about proper tire pressure or even West African gold.)*

It may be wise for folks like you, folks like me to do an honest self-assessment. Honestly, how much of your day is dominated by distraction? How much of your stress is attributed to things that may be important, could well be trivial, but are seldom essential? Truthfully, what qualifies for your ASAP attention? Is there a synthesis between your stated values and your attention span or is there a dissonance between your priorities and your timecard? How much of life's intent and purpose are wasted in distractions? Not every voice telling you what is urgent speaks the truth.

Such questions are at the heart of our text this morning. In the lead-up to our passage Jesus' words carry an apocalyptic edge: "Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known;" "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks." And with these words, Jesus is hinting that life as we know it on this spinning globe has an end that we cannot schedule as we would an eye exam or an oil change.

Yet, at least up to this point, Jesus' hints don't seem to be getting through, and this becomes obvious in our passage. It seems that a number of folks had been talking together before being with Jesus that day. I don't know if it was at a neighborhood barbeque, or in the parking lot after the PTA meeting, or in the lobby of the funeral home, but I, along with you, certainly know the conversation. Hushed voices. Darting eyes to be sure that no one is listening who shouldn't be listening, certainly not whoever is the subject of the conversation. Something bad has happened, real bad, tragedy bad, and curious minds

filled with spurious rumors are feverishly drilling down empty wells, intrusively wanting to know what went down and who's to blame.

"Did you hear about those Galileans? Traveled 60 miles down to Jerusalem to offer sacrifice at the temple only have a bunch of Pilate's thugs cut 'em down right in the middle of worship; their blood mixing in with the pigeon's blood as it washed down the drain." "Tragic, oh so tragic." "Just think about their children. So sad. So sad."

"Well, you know I heard they kind of brought it on themselves. You know, Galilee is just chock full of Zealots, always talking about a revolution, chasing those centurions back to Rome. Like that's gonna happen. Pilate's not going to put up with that." "You know, I don't like to say nothin' about the dead and all, but I know some of those victims have some money, and they didn't bring anything but a ratty ol' bird to that sacrifice. Say Jesus, you figure that was why they got themselves killed?"

"Or, what about those poor folks so randomly crushed when that tower collapsed down by the pool of Siloam? Horrific!" "Well, God rest their souls, but you know who that was, don't you? It was the family

with that big pack of wild kids, always running around the temple complex like they owned the place. Why, I heard that one of those boys even snuck into Holy of Holies last year with a bottle of stolen wine." "Such a waste." "Such a shame."

I can just see Jesus scrunching his eyes, his mouth open without words as his brain tries to process the wild speculations he is hearing. But he finds his voice and in a way that screams - *What are you thinking? Have you not been listening to what I've been saying to you?* - Jesus says, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." That warning is so important that he says it twice.

Is Jesus, here, playing the part of the crazed street preacher, or maybe some Great Awakening revivalist like Jonathan Edwards, dangling his audience over the fires of hell? I don't think so. Yes, ours is a God of justice, but that justice is always bound by love. Repentance is not so much about addresses in the afterlife as it is about life's focus

and intention right here and now. Repentance is a redirection of energy, imagination, effort, purpose. Anne Lamott said, "Repent just means to change direction — and NOT to be said by someone who is wagging their forefinger at you. Repentance is a blessing." Repentance isn't about hating yourself and letting guilt be your god and guide.

Repentance is about realizing that even with your foibles and flaws, God sees something in you that God can use to bring healing to God's world. Repentance is realizing that the life God has given you is too wonderful and too precarious to waste, and that the true needs of this suffering-soaked world are too pressing to put off.

When Jesus hears the crowd's assumptions about those Galileans and the victims of the tower collapse, particularly their effort to claim the victims' deaths were because God was fed up with their flaws, you can imagine Jesus' blood pressure spiking or Jesus feeling that migraine erupting behind his eyes. *What are you thinking?* "Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?" *Are you saying that you are somehow morally superior to them because you're still alive?* Here, Jesus is rejecting a notion that creeps up now and again in scripture and continues sneaking into our

thoughts and rumor fests today, the mistaken notion that suffering is somehow God's way of handling someone's character flaws. God does not operate that way (repeat)! Jesus has to be frustrated because, if they had been listening to him, watching him, following him, they would have figured that out by now. God is not itching to drop a piano on your head or throw the latest Covid variant at you because you've been a bad child this week or were churlish with a coworker or failed at friendship. Jesus is debunking the notion that bad things just happen to bad people, that suffering or untimely death are deserved. Everything that Jesus lived for and died for was a rejection of that image of God.

What Jesus did want to make clear here is that life is precarious ... for **all** of us. And we know, on this side of the cross, that Jesus wasn't excluding himself from this truth. The mystery of life is that it is both precious and finite. Jesus is saying that life is a gift to be treasured with intention and purpose rather than be wasted in blame, condescension, scandalmongering, greed, and malicious intent. Every day spent building up the particular world where you are living is God's intention for you and the source of joy and hope. Every day spent tearing down the particular world where you live is a precious gift lost

and the wellspring of bitterness. I met a woman yesterday at a wedding shower (*me --- wedding shower --- what's wrong with that picture*)

Anyway, I was awed by her engagement with life in this world. She's currently assisting a number of local Afghan refugees to get settled. She's been to the border to offer support for migrants at the border. And she has completed the great spiritual pilgrimage of Spain's El Camino trail twice. Wow! I mean, this week I managed to pick up ice for a church event.

We spend a lot of time here talking about four words and how a life spent intentionally discerning the meaning of those four words and acting on them is a full life no matter its length. Love God. Love neighbor. Well, after studying this text this week, a dear friend of ours suggested that we should seriously consider adding a fifth word, and I'd tend to agree. Love God. Love neighbor. Now! It would be a shame to miss a moment of what God intends for us. The lesson of the fig tree is that it's not too late. God's patience is biblical in proportion. But the gift of you is too precious to waste right here, right now. Your world, God's kingdom is waiting. Amen.