

The Third Sunday in Lent – 2022

Ezekiel 33:7-20

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

I am going to say something that a great many of you may be able to relate to: I am getting old. I am becoming a petrified network of cables and wires that are over-weathered. Children are flexible, limber. I am as tight as a piano string. Gray hair and wrinkles... who cares? Having to sit down and literally pull up on my knees just to put on my socks – that bugs. A very wise older lady, whose suffering and fortitude dwarfs my own, a sunny lady whose raging arthritis forces her to walk like a question mark, stopped everything she was doing on one occasion, squared her shoulders to look me straight in the eye and said this: "You've got to keep moving." "You've got to stretch and keep moving."

How is it with your soul? This question is the pastor's thermometer, the pastor's blood pressure cuff. How is it with your soul? The effects of age on the body we can see. Likewise, disease, sickness – for the most part, those things present themselves on the outside; the health of the soul... not so much. An arthritic soul is a common condition; a soul tight with self, over-weathered with self-pity, self-righteousness, self-importance, self-contentment. An arthritic soul is an altogether too common condition... but it isn't that visible. The beauty of the human constitution is that the aged individual, whose body is a wreck, can have the supplest soul on the street. How is it with your soul? The tight body needs to stretch to maintain positive mobility. What does your soul need? What stretch of the soul would keep us agile in faith, hopeful in every situation, and supple in spirit, producing the fruit that delights our heavenly Father? It is not complicated – repent!

Some people come to Jesus clearly hoping to get a rise out of Him. The Israelites at that time lived in a constant crisis between church and state. Rome was a foreign occupying force and the Israelites were subject to their laws, their taxes, their carnal brutality. Some Galileans had been mown down as they were engaged in worship. Pontius Pilate used his civil authority and killed some of his subjects in the Temple area. Were they rebels, engaged in undermining the state? Were they completely innocent, unfortunate collateral casualties in a police operation? We are not told (not only is the Bible silent on this event, there is no secular history that mentions it either). It was, no doubt, a hot political topic and those who brought the subject up with Jesus were likely expecting either a political diatribe or some half-baked moralistic interpretation of the events that blamed the victims. They were very much mistaken. What did Jesus say in reply to those folks who brought up the event? "Unless *you* repent, you will all likewise perish."

There is a threat out there, a dire threat. To be sure, we face the maniacal perversion of a Russian dictator. The world could come completely unglued in a moment. North Korea, China, and Iran – what a brilliant trifecta of peaceable allies they are! Look closer to home: We have an effectively open border to our south with a drug war taking place, bringing gobs of fentanyl into this country. In 2021, over 100,000 people died due to

drugs. Gas prices are through the roof, damaging the poorest among us the most. Big Tech is keen to censor speech that they don't like in order to prop up their favored politicians – most of whom don't seem to have our best interests at heart. Government has assumed emergency powers that have whet their appetites for more. There is a threat out there – but it is not political, not viral, not an external menace. The real threat is sin – in *your* heart, *your* mind, *your* spirit. Sin is gangrene, cancer, arthritis in the soul – unrepentant sin eats, it devours the agility of your faith, it turns a supple spirit into an increasingly fruitless tree. What is the threat? Hearing these words: Cut it down!

Repent! The self-satisfied soul does not see the danger. It has to be said: Taking our cues from the media or the government about how to manage our faith, how our souls are to be fed, how to conduct our church life – taking our cues from the media or the government on these things is a pretty big mistake. Repent. God is our judge. Our sin is a wretched black paste which we have smeared ourselves with and we would present ourselves to Him, in His royal throne room, covered head to toe in our lust, our greed, our loveless indifference to our neighbor? Yes, there are a myriad of threats that surround us. There will always be hot political topics that vie for our undivided attention, but let's keep one thing in mind – this life is temporary. Threats to the body, threats to life in this world aren't as truly menacing as threats to our eternal destiny. Hopefully you can now see that the pastor's question, (how is it with your soul?) is not just small talk that leads to pleasantries about the weather or that MLB has solved its bargaining stalemate.

Repent. We have sinned against heaven. Infatuated with other's shortcomings, we fail to mark and amend our own offenses against God, against our neighbor. His holiness we have disparaged by foul talk, by sexual permissiveness, by justifying our sin. We care more about how others will view us than about defending His Name – the Name that saves us! Repent. God's justice, an unquestioned divine right and a completely accurate judgment, cries out against us all: "cut it down." *That* is a threat. Repent. Keep moving spiritually toward Christ, repent of your sin and stretch your soul. The repentant heart, supple and lithe, will see itself as the fruitless fig tree. We readily confess: "I, a poor, miserable sinner, justly deserve your present and eternal punishment." The repentant heart knows God's justice but looks steadfastly to His mercy. The penitent heart says with St. Paul, "Christ came to *save sinners* of whom I am chief." Stretch. Your soul needs to stretch to beat back the spiritual arthritis that inevitably comes by living in this world, that inevitably comes because of sin in our lives. Only the repentant do things like this: Rejoice in suffering, like blessing those who curse you, like forgiving those who sin against you – before they ask.

Jesus marks the main threat – sin – and alerts us, calls us to repent. But He does more, so much more. A vineyard of fruitless trees, the world over, a barren landscape – and the Lord Christ ventures into this desert. True God and true man – He is the living Fruit Tree of Life. Courage, fortitude, patience, love, joy, peace, kindness, fidelity, humility, compassion – He embodies all that we could ever aspire to. The Lord Christ is the origin and source of every good thing. He loved God above all things, He loved you as Himself – and He was hewn down. Jesus had marked the main threat – sin – and He confronted it, He took it, He allowed it to ravage Him, He allowed Himself to be covered with the black

paste of our putridity. Jesus became sin and the voice of justice rang out – cut it down. For us, He was cut down. Blood and water gushed from the Tree of Life into the vineyard of humanity. Blood and water was the seed for a new grove of grace. Fertilized and fed, baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection, you are a new tree. Baptized into Christ, the black paste of our sin is washed off by His blood and we are robed in His righteousness. Fed with His body and blood, His virtue courses through your soul.

Jesus marks the main threat – He puts Himself between you and sin, between you and death. Pilate killed another Galilean. Scripture is not silent on this Galilean's death. Scripture tells us that He was completely innocent – sinless. His blood was poured out entirely for everyday people like us. He gives that blood to you now to make you supple with His grace, to share His love, His life, His virtue, and His glory... with you. It is a joy to see Christ in action in this place – to see the trees He defends, the lives of His people which He fertilizes and feeds and then to see the Christ-like fruit laden on the limbs of everyday people like us. For now, we stretch and keep moving; we repent and eagerly receive the heavenly gifts that He dispenses. We follow the One who has called us to Himself. For now, we live as fruitful trees in the Lord's vineyard. To all this we adamantly say: to God alone be the glory.