

*Now is the Time*  
from the pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church  
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
the Reverend Dr. James L. Carter

Reading: Luke 13:1-9

March 7, 2010

For a dramatic opening let's begin with an updated  
paraphrase of our morning text:

At that very time there were some people present who told him about the 192 victims on the Madrid trains whose blood terrorists had mixed with their morning efforts to get to work in 2009. He answered them: "Do you imagine that, because these residents of Madrid suffered this fate, they must have been greater sinners than anyone else in Spain? I tell you they were not; but unless you repent, you will all of you come to the same end. Or the thousands who were killed when the Twin Towers fell in New York City on September 11 – do you imagine they were more guilty than

all the other people living in New York? I tell you they were not; but unless you repent, you will all of you come to the same end.”

Repentance, it appears, is not just for today or tomorrow. Repentance is for life. It is a discipline that God expects us to exercise every day.

Now that we have had several years to reflect on the events of September 11, 2001, we may respond with more wisdom than we did immediately after the event. I’m not so sure we can say the same for a tragedy in Haiti or along the road outside Kabul last week, or along the earthquake-torn coast of Chili. Such horrible, destructive events leave us with questions. Most of our questions are reflections on “why this happened” and “why it happened to those who were killed.”

More likely, some are still asking the theodicy question after 9/11: “Why did God allow this to occur? If God is all-powerful, why didn’t God stop the terrorists before they ever took over the planes and the trains?” And, finally, “Had these people done something in their lives that God was punishing?”

We don't ask this question as the ancients did...but we do wonder why some were spared while others died.

That is the question on the lips of those who confront Jesus in the text from Luke. It was common belief that when disaster struck one's life, as it did the Galileans and the Jerusalemites, one was being punished for one's sins. We may not believe that today but we are still disturbed by the tragic and sudden deaths of people caught in the terrorists' war and we still are heard asking, "Why did this have to happen to them?"

You and I know that we do not have satisfactory answers to these questions. All we can do is affirm, again, what we do know and what we believe about God, about the randomness of tragic events, and about our own response to such events.

God is not obligated to explain to us why thousands were killed on 9/11, nor is God obligated to give us an acceptable explanation for continuing acts of terrorism or even tragedies that are called natural disasters when many people die. There is much about the ways of God we will never know and it is presumptuous of us to assume that God owes us an explanation for every event that makes the front page of the newspaper.

What we *do* know, however, is enough to set for ourselves an agenda of work to be done, disciplines to be followed, faith to be exercised, and prayers to be voiced. *What we know is that God has acted on our behalf to provide for us salvation from sin.* We are expected and encouraged to accept this gift and let God's grace wash over our lives, starting today. The timing is important. The gift is offered now. There is no guarantee that the offer will remain indefinitely. In fact, there is the suggestion that if we do not act now to repent and receive God's grace, the offer will go away and we will be good for nothing other than to be cut down like a non-bearing fig tree. To debate, endlessly, the theodicy question is to distract ourselves from a larger question: *Is it enough that God has called you to repent and live faithfully?*

The memorial plaza design for September 11, 2001 at ground zero in New York was determined after a competition among designs submitted. The winner was a young 34 year old named Michael Arad. His design was chosen from a field of eight finalists in 2003. There were 5,201 submissions in all. Paul Goldberger, an architecture critic, has written that "(Arad's) submission was the sharpest and the least sentimental of the

eight designs that (now) go into the final segment of the competition. He proposed marking the footprints of the Twin Towers with sunken reflecting pools, and he left most of the ground level open as a stark plaza. Compared with many of the other designs, which employed shimmering lights, water, and gardens, Arad was tough. He used austerity to suggest emptiness and loss, and he avoided kitsch.”<sup>1</sup>

It is Paul Goldberger’s note that Arad’s design was the “least sentimental” that intrigues me. It is as though both he and Arad have read our text and know that when it comes to dealing with tragedy and loss there is little room for the sentimental thought. Why? Because it won’t hold up. We need far more in such moments of reflection. We need realistic reminders of how empty is our life without those who are gone. We need a thorough reminder that it is only by God’s grace that we are not among those who are lost to this life. We need something that makes us resolve to act NOW to receive the gift of redemption and to live our lives in a way that reflects what we have learned and what we believe about God and grace. If we postpone our

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Goldberger. *Slings and Arrows*, The New Yorker, Feb. 9, 2004, p. 85.

response to God's offer we risk losing the very life with God we seek.

You probably have been present when a friend announced that "he had seen the light" of God's grace and was going to change the way he lives. The announcement usually makes all who hear it a bit uncomfortable because it suggests that *we* should be seeing the same light and resolving to turn our lives around also. The person who makes such a declaration often impresses us with significant lifestyle changes and a reordering of values. What formally had been important no longer is. That which seemed most valuable now appears to be hollow. Our neighbor has found new clarity about his priorities.

We have all heard the testimonials of sports figures, film celebrities, politicians and ordinary folk down the street telling how they have seen the light of God's salvation and have turned their lives in a new direction. We sometimes discount these reports but, if we listen to this text and the parable of the fig tree, we should give them our full attention. These people are testifying that they have done as the fig tree parable of Jesus suggests: they have set the tree of their lives on a regimen of

new growth. We may not like to have to sit through another prayer breakfast and hear another baseball great tell us how his life has been transformed but it happens to be the very change that God in Christ is looking for from all of us. Perhaps our turning will not be as dramatic as that of some others. Perhaps we will never be invited to speak at a prayer breakfast about the turn around. But you have to admire the folks who acknowledge that they had lots to learn about the ways of God in the lives of men and women. The parable suggests that the sophisticated theologians among us, the Bible-toting Sunday school teachers, the fourth-generation Presbyterians among us and the wealthy captains of industry all have something to learn from this parable, namely: the time to look at your life with God is *now*! Repentance is a posture God expects us to make permanent.

When tragic events hit the news and create headlines on page one, we need not assume, as the ancients did, that those who died were greater sinners than the rest of us. But we are expected to let the tragic event serve as a wake-up call to each of us if we are living the unexamined life. That is the point of the stories. Our lives are never beyond a closer look, even when we seem to have the religion thing and the church thing and the

Bible reading thing down to a beautiful pattern for living. Don't be too sure, says the fig tree story. If your life is not producing new fruit then it may well be cut down to make room for those lives that are, says the parable. It's a scary thought and, I expect, is designed to be just that. Sometimes it takes shock to move us off the mark and into more effective living. Don't ever assume you know all there is to know about the God movement, the kingdom of God on earth. We still have much to discover, to learn, to hear and see. Thus church attendance spiked after 9/11 for a short time. Where are they now?

We will never be able to say we know all there is to know about God. The mystery of the undisclosed truth is greater than any of us can comprehend in a lifetime. All we can do is turn ourselves toward the truth as a plant turns toward the light of the morning sun. That truth, God's truth, will challenge us, stretch us, lead us and heal us. That truth will make us whole again. That is the goal of all our efforts at repentance: to be at peace with ourselves and one with God.

Thanks be to God for waking us up.