

3.20.2022 Lent 3

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 55:1-9, 17-18; Psalm 63:1-8; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

“Return to God and Live”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Today’s readings are an invitation to abundant life with God. On the surface, “abundant life with God” sounds like something we would leap at, yet all too often human beings forget about God altogether amidst the cares and concerns of life. We often place our thoughts and our ways ahead of God’s thoughts and ways. We allow corporate, economic and national interests to define our thoughts and ways, and even our sense of human identity and destiny. We value ourselves and others often solely by ethnic, gender, national or economic identity, rather than valuing ourselves and others as children of God.

The reading from Isaiah this morning says it all, *“Incline your ear and come to me, so that you may live...For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.”* These words of Isaiah are, of course, the foundation of Christianity and the focus of Lent: “Return to me and listen, so that you might live abundantly.” Listening to God’s voice, we add our own voices, singing a melody that describes God’s thoughts and ways for all human community.

The world has always been a noisy place, but it seems noisier now that we have created 24/7 Internet and television. We are constantly bombarded with news, told what to think and who to hate, told who is deserving of our attention and who to be suspicious of. If we hear these things enough we begin to believe them. The interests of politics, corporations and nations all vie for our attention so that we might think and act accordingly. Against this noise of the world, God says, *“Incline your ear and come to me, so that you may live...For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.”*

When I was a small boy, I enjoyed hearing the often, funny stories my father told me. There’s one story that has remained with me. My Dad told me about a time he saw someone trying to parallel park a car on the street. The space was really too small for the car but the driver was determined to park in that spot. The driver backed in a little fast and hit the car behind him or her. Someone standing on the street shouted out, “Hit ‘em again!” And so the driver moved forward, shifted into reverse and hit the other car again!

Because I was a child, I had no concept of things like auto insurance, and was still learning that we are to treat our neighbors with kindness and care. As I got older, I read Martin Luther’s *Small*

*Catechism* and his commentary on the Ninth and Tenth Commandments that we are to help and serve our neighbors so that they can keep and protect what is theirs. These words are a reminder about God's thoughts regarding life together in human community.

As I have gotten older, my father's story reminds me that it is sometimes a challenge to not listen to the world saying things like "Hit 'em again!" These words remind me that sometimes we are all too willing to go along with participating in causing our neighbor harm or damaging their possessions. This is, of course, a reminder of the reading from Isaiah, The Lord says, "*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways.*" Isaiah, Luther and my father's story remind me that there are times when we have chosen to be silent in the face of neglect, discrimination and hatred, rather than speaking up, saying, "Someone might get hurt, someone might need my help."

Isaiah's words are a reminder that God's words can be a moral compass guiding our journeys as we also hear the many other competing voices in our world. The Lord says, "*Come to me and listen, so that you may live.*" It is impossible for me to think of that anecdote about "Hit 'em again!" and not also realize that today we are watching something similar, only on a vastly larger scale. Russian forces are seeking to occupy and annex a neighboring nation, Ukraine, and hitting them over and over again with shells, rockets and bullets. "*My thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways*" describes the human folly and tragedy of inflicting harm upon our neighbor.

If we think that Lent and the themes of returning to the Lord are simply a nice old-fashioned tradition or a theological luxury, humanity forgets at its own peril that the needs of our neighbors are forever linked with our own needs. Only in listening to God's thoughts and ways can we learn to speak up for, serve and protect our neighbor. The season of Lent is meant to lead us in the wilderness, by as Paul writes in the second reading, offering the water of life from the rock that is Christ. The waters of baptism into Christ continue to flow over us so that we might serve others.

The second reading from Corinthians offers insight into a very human story. Israel complained and grumbled about their lot in life. Life in the wilderness was not easy, and so they departed from community with God and sinned against their neighbor. All of us know what it means to complain and grumble. We complain about our work; we complain to city hall about our community; we complain about all manner of things to our family, we even complain to God. We want the world to go according to our thoughts and our ways. So we complain. Yet Paul writes, "*And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.*" We complain because we are being tested in the wilderness of our own lives. We are really no different than human beings who have walked

before us. Isaiah and Paul remind us to turn our thoughts to God, so that we might not be destroyed by our own complaints, thoughts and ways.

Lent offers us a reminder that *“No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.”* The way we endure testing is by seeking to listen to God’s voice in the wilderness. Like Elijah in the wilderness, God waited to speak in silence. God waits for us to quiet ourselves against the noise of the world, the noise of complaints, of political folly and even the noise of shelling our neighbors.

We are marred and broken by sin. Only God’s grace allows us to return to God again and again transforming our thoughts and lives into the fruit of God’s compassion and mercy toward the world, our neighbors, and even our enemies.

Jesus’ Parable of the Fig Tree reminds us that our lives are meant to bear fruit. What animates and drives your thoughts and ways in this world? The voices of others saying “Hit ‘em again!” or God’s voice teaching us to help and serve our neighbor, protecting what they have?

During the Second World War, the German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about living not in fear of someone who could simply kill the body, but living with the knowledge that God alone has the power to destroy both body and soul. Jesus’ example of the fig tree is such a warning. Jesus warns us to bear good fruit, to live for God and for our neighbor. When our lives no longer bear good fruit that supports our neighbor, we become like the fig tree in today’s gospel. When we allow the many thoughts and ways of the world to tell us who to hate and who to kill, we become like the fig tree in today’s gospel, withered and without the fruits of God’s abundant grace.

However, there is grace in Jesus’ parable about the fig tree. God gives the gardener time to work on the tree, to dig around the roots and to fertilize it. The season of Lent is really a season of grace. During Lent we are given time to grow and to bear fruit. During Lent, God digs around our roots, prunes away old and useless branches, and fertilizes our lives with God’s word and grace. Renewed, we bear fruit that will sustain our neighbor, creating human community in the wilderness.

During Lent, take time to give to your neighbor, to pray for your enemies, and to fast from the world. Return to God, bearing the fruit of compassion and care for your neighbor in need.

Return to God and live. Amen.