

Cut It Down  
Luke 13:1-9

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the ears of our hearts be open to the word of God this day. AMEN.

“The Wrath of God burns against his enemies...the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready. Hell opens its mouth wide to receive them. There is nothing between you and hell – but air. God holds you over the pit of death as one holds a spider or some other loathsome insect over the fire...for God abhors you; God is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire. O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in, it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit full of fire and wrath, that you are held over in the hands of an angry God!”

Wow, that is a scary way to begin a sermon. In 1741 Jonathan Edwards, an early American Preacher of the great Awakening movement preached that now famous sermon – “In the Hands of an Angry God.” Those were different times in 1740’s. Imagine if I tried to preach that way with all the appropriate shouting, pulpit thumping and hand waving the revivalists were adapt at? You might just ignore it or tune it out. Some might have nightmares to picture yourself hanging over fire about to be dropped in at any moment. But what if I kept preaching that way for a few weeks, I would think generally you would stop coming or demand that the council make me change my sermon topic, because the wrath of an angry God isn’t what we would like to hear. We don’t like the image of a judging, vengeful, tormenting God. No we would not put up to long with an image that Jonathan Edwards was preaching about in the 1740’s. Times have indeed changed, now we talk about a loving God, a forgiving God, a grace filled God, a God that accepts everyone, no matter what, as long as they are a good person.

We have gotten away from the God that Jonathan Edwards preached about, the angry God that holds our lives in his hands and can save us or can drop us into the pit of everlasting fire. But as horrible an image that is, Jonathan Edwards did in fact preach on an element of truth. Just look at our Gospel reading today.

It is reported to Jesus that there were some Galileans who were worshipping at the temple, when Pilate sent in troops and killed them right then and there as they were offering sacrifices. That definitely is not a pretty scene to picture or even think about and we really don’t know any of the details. We don’t know why the Roman Governor thought that this group of Galileans were worthy of death. We don’t know if they were leading an insurrection or revolt. We don’t know if they were worshipping peacefully. We don’t know if Pilate was just having a bad day and decided to make an example of them to the rest of the Jews. But these

reported deaths were definitely the news for the day on everyone's minds and they were looking for the reason why? I am sure Jesus knew that some of the people were thinking that perhaps these men who had been killed were awful sinners since they were executed. Now there is nothing new thinking like that. People say it all the time right. We say "they got what they deserved", "Or he was asking for it", or even "they got their just desserts." Even when tragedy strikes people look for a reason. Why am I sick, why was there an earthquake. Why did my loved one have to die. Someone must be at fault. We still think a lot like the people of Jesus day, those Galileans must have been worse sinners then everyone else so they probably deserved their executions.

Doesn't that sound a bit hypocritical. To say that those people deserve death more so because they were worse then us. When Jesus turns to the people and asks them this question he is basically making them squirm. You are wrong, Do not think they were worse sinners then you, but unless you repent you will all perish as they did.

Now just like Jonathan Edwards preached there is no beating around the bush here. Repent for all are sinners, repent now or perish for ever, Jesus is basically saying. He even goes on to give them another example, the tower of Siloam collapsed do you really think the ones crushed by the falling tower were worse people then you.

"NO, I tell you unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

At this point, I can picture Jesus saying those very words to the crowds and he pauses to let the words sink in. "I tell you unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." The crowd standing there hears the words and you can almost picture their blank stars, empty faces, open mouths. Perhaps they turned away from Jesus and looked down to their feet, to avoid eye contact. And Jesus after that pregnant pause to let it sink in, continues to stress his point by telling a parable.

A Man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. One year he goes by working on the vines and looks for a snack on the fig tree and there is nothing there to eat. The next year he comes by again and notices no fruit. For a third year the man notices no fruit on this fig tree that is taking up space in his vineyard sucking up important nutrients of the land and consuming his workers time. So in anger he calls over his chief gardener asking, "why is this tree here, for three years it has produced anything, cut it down why waste our soil and time."

Now go back again and image the crowds that had those blank looks that Jesus just told, Repent or perish to just a minute ago. Now they hear Jesus say his story and they hear the words Cut it down. That image of cutting it down and removing it would definitely have an

impact on their hearers or were told they are sinners and unless they repent they were by cut down!

The story makes sense, you can feel the disappointment of the owner and his frustration with receiving no fruit from it for three years. We can understand that since he owns the farm and the soil and the plants he has a right to cut it down, most any farmer would, rip it out and plant a tree that will grow something useful. The people standing there listening to Jesus can understand even this parable. They are the trees that bear no fruit. We are the trees that bear no fruit. Jesus is talking about humanity, all people. God keeps coming to look for something good from us and yet we are still sinful. Paul even talks about it in our second reading, we don't want you to be unaware, turn back to God, because the world is filled with idolaters that have traded worshipping God for sleeping in, sports, work, money, fame, whatever. We know there is sexual immorality, that we abide with, ignore, or even looking at some TV shows, lift up and honor. We know there is unfaithfulness, putting God to the test. We think it and others think it, If you God would do this I will do this. If / Then. I have even heard that by parishnors that tell me boldly that they will give more as soon as they win the lottery. As if gambling is the way, they think if God really wants to help then they will win. I have been through the Bible that kind of wheeling and dealing with God is not in there. No there are all kinds of idolatries, immorals, and false beliefs all around us and within us trying to pull us away from God.

So when JHesus tells that the tree is unfruitful and it should be cut down, we are the very ones he is talking about.

But thank goodness the parable doesn't end there. With a new breath Jesus continues on with his story, the chief gardener tells the owner, "Let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year well and good, if not cut it down." Jesus asks the owner to forgive, that is the greek word here used as let it alone. Forgive it and let it grow. Jesus is the chief gardener who comes to call us back to God, to repent to give us that second and third and fourth chance to grow in the faith. Today the message may be hard, to hear because it is about judgment, that day is coming, but we still have time. Through the grace of Christ we are given a word to repent, ask for forgiveness of our sinfulness and seek the grace of God. This lesson asks us to examine our selves and wonder how have we responded to God's grace. Jonathan Edwards is right, we are in the hands of God, but God wants to forgive us and hold us forever, if we just turn and repent and trust in the Lord. How are you responding to God today?

3/11/2007

4

May the peace and Grace of God be with you this day and throughout the week to come.  
AMEN.

Let us pray for the whole people of God in Christ Jesus, and for all people according to their needs.

Almighty God, you have fulfilled the promise made so long ago in the gift of your Son, who came not to be redeemed but to redeem, not to be saved but to save. He came as the sacrificial lamb who offered himself up for the sins of all humanity. To call us to repentance, to change our hearts and minds, to cleanse us from all things that take us away from you. To make us worship and honor you in all your glory, to bear fruit worthy of our calling as your children. We give you thanks for this gift of this blessedness.

LORD IN YOUR MERCY, Hear our Prayer..

O Heavenly Father, we ask that you bless us with the mind of service, to be like the sacrificial lamb who gave of himself so all might have life. Allow us to follow in his footsteps, to overcome hatred, and division, to seek your path of service and discipleship. Allow us to come to your waters of baptism and your table of Holy Communion and leave renewed and energized for your work in this community and beyond.

LORD IN YOUR MERCY, Hear our Prayer.

God, send your comforting spirit to descend upon this world and guide nations and leaders to come to understand and know of your ways of peace. Hold this world in your ever caring hands Lord, and mend broken hearts, overcome hardships of disasters and diseases. Lord, grant comfort to those in mourning so they may see the light of your everlasting kingdom. Grant your spirit of healing to those who are torn down by sickness, or troubled by despair, be with all those who are alone, forgotten, homebound and be with all those we lift up in our prayers to you now Howell Crawford, Tyler Freeman, Jessica Becker, Norma Kreidler, And Dorias Peck and all those we name now to you....

LORD IN YOUR MERCY, hear our prayer.

Lord, we pray for your church universal and all of your faithful people, empower all people to come to your Word, to repent and turn to you in all that we do. Commission us to be your witnesses and apostles sent to bear your good news to our communities and beyond. Use us Lord to build up your body of faith, to worship you and sing your praises throughout our communities and beyond.

LORD IN YOUR MERCY, hear our prayer.

Into your hands, o Lord we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.