

Third Sunday in Lent; March 23, 2025
+ Luke 13:1-9 +
“The Living Word: A Good Converter”

At that time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. He answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered these things? I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you will all perish too. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think that they were worse sinners than all the people living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you will all perish, too.”

He told them this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it, but he did not find any. So he said to the gardener, ‘Look, for three years now I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and I have found none. Cut it down. Why even let it use up the soil? But the gardener replied to him, ‘Sir, leave it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put fertilizer on it. If it produces fruit next year, fine. But if not, cut it down.’”

One day you are talking a walk and see a cat. It’s not your cat. And maybe you’re not a cat person. But the cat looks you right in the eye. And what does the cat do? The cat meows. The cat is trying to convert you. She is trying to take your attention away from who you are and where you’re going and think about her instead.

A boy walks on a beach with a piece of paper and a bottle. You know what he’s going to do. He’s going to wait until the tide goes out, and then he’s going to shove that paper down into the bottle and throw it as far as he can into the ocean. Why does he do it? He wants to convert the world. He wants to touch what he cannot touch now, to be known in some way by what does not know him now.

Flowers all across Northern Virginia are springing out of the soil at this very moment. And with their blossoms they wave in the sun, as if to say, “Look at me! Look at me!” to all the birds and all the bees and to you as well. And why does a flower do it? Like the cat, like the boy with the bottle, the flower wants to convert you and the bees and the birds. It wants the message shared and believed: “I’m important! Pay attention to me!”

Conversion is simple. Conversion is a change of mind. It’s being changed from a person who sees the world one way to being someone who sees the world in a new way. And conversion usually happens through language. The world is full of language; the world was made with speech and it still hums with speech and words. Every creature out there is humming with the message that says, “Pay attention to me! Turn your mind away from where you’re looking and count me to be important.”

The original language of the New Testament uses the word *metanoia* for conversion. I do not burden you with this fact for no reason. This word for conversion or “repentance” very literally means “a change of mind.” The mind changes from seeing the world one way to seeing it another way.

What truth does Jesus want you to see and acknowledge when he says, **“But unless you repent, you will all perish too”**? You can’t drive around that word like a truck driving around a pothole. Jesus wants you to drive through that pothole and let it bounce you and rattle you. Feel the kathunk. Unless you repent, you will perish. He wants you to see something there. And what is it he wants you to see?

It can help to remember what had just happened when Jesus first spoke these words. Pontius Pilate had mingled the blood of some Galileans with their sacrifices. He murdered worshipers from Jesus’ own home region of Israel. As they were bringing sacrifices to the temple, he killed them for a reason Jesus leaves unstated. And in another place, Siloam, a tower had collapsed and crushed eighteen people. And people had been asking what people always ask into the face of such tragedy: Why? Why did those people have to die? And why did they have to die like that?

These days people rarely blame those who are victimized by murder or accident. If these days a governor ordered worshipers to be mowed down on their way to church, we would blame the governor. #standwithgalilee And these days if a tower fell and people died, there would be an investigation and lawsuits blaming the owners, builders, architects, or all of the above. There could even be prison sentences when we figure out who did what wrong with the building of that tower.

But back in those days, blame wasn’t assigned like that. People blamed the folks who were killed. “What did they do that made them die in such a tragic way?” That seems foreign to us now. But a closer look reveals that both of those approaches are really the same. They both seek to make sense of tragedy by assigning blame to someone, either the people who died or some other group that can be held responsible. Both approaches want to draw a line between good people and bad people, the guilty and the innocent. Both approaches want to give life to the idea that we could avoid these things if only we were good enough, smart enough, obedient enough.

But Jesus doesn’t let us go there. **“But unless you repent, your will all perish too.”** It’s as if Jesus knows something about us that runs deeper than some list we can keep of good things and bad things about people. It’s as if Jesus sees us differently: he sees at the root of all of us a problem in us all that erases our lines of good and bad and will not allow us to put ourselves on the right side. He sees sin common in all of us, sin that damns all of us...unless something changes.

When we speak of original sin, that’s what we’re speaking of. It’s not just that Adam and Eve originally sinned and messed everything up for all of us. It’s that we all have that sin inherited

from them, and it messes all of us up all of the way...unless something changes. Unless there is a conversion.

God wants to convert; he wants to change your mind from seeing the world with lines between the good and the bad, the lucky and unlucky, the guilty and the innocent. He would stop you from drawing that line and trying to find some way to put yourself on the right side of it. He wants you to see yourself both as the one who dies tragically and the one who is responsible for it.

When you see yourself that way, you are ready to see Jesus. Who else is Jesus, except the one who stepped across all the lines we try to draw and made himself the guilty one? People talk all the time about Jesus crossing lines to dine with undesirables and hold little children in his arms. But the biggest line he crossed was making the holy one the guilty, the blameless one blameworthy. Who else hangs on the tree of the cross but Jesus, who not only dies tragically but also lets it happen with all the sin, all the blame, all the punishment on his shoulders? On the cross, he is both Pilate and the Galileans, both the builder of tower and the one it falls on.

Think of this: Jesus even took the blame for his own death: **“Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”** The blame was his, not theirs. In that Jesus on the cross, all humanity ends up in the same boat. Or, I should say, the same body! Every sinner, Jew and Gentile, man and woman, is found in that man who becomes our sin.

And he is the one God raised from the dead. He is the one where our eyes belong. Our eyes no longer belong on everyone else, trying to draw lines and sift through who’s good and who’s bad, who’s right and who’s wrong. Now our eyes belong on him, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

When our eyes are on him, and we see our sin die in his death, something happens to us. We are converted. We no longer have to work hard to see in ourselves the right kind of person. Instead, in Jesus who became the wrong of person for us, we have the freedom to admit our own evil.

Repentance is easy: confess sins, and trust there is forgiveness in God’s heart for Jesus’ sake; you and I say that we are not the people we should be; we trust Jesus alone to be the one we are supposed to be. For he has slipped himself into your place of sin, caught hold of yourself, and brought you up with him in his resurrection. And he did it by becoming on that cross the root problem that we all have in common. He became our sin; he became our death.

Conversion changes life to see things that way. It happens in ways that look small. Sometimes it happens in ways that look big. It may look so big that a person will back on it and say, “That’s when I was converted; that’s my conversion story.” And that’s real conversion. But it also happens every day as the Spirit continually turns us to look and notice and see Jesus. To look away from our justifications of our ourselves and to look away from our blame of each other, and to see the crucified and risen one alone. The Word of God is doing that for us throughout our lives. It does it every time it puts Jesus before our eyes, into our hearts, and on our lips. Amen.