

Sermon:
The Rev. Poulson Reed
Lent 3 C March 7, 2010

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Do you have a recurring anxiety dream? You know: those dreams in which you were supposed to do something, but didn't, and are about to pay the price? How many of you have those dreams?

I do. In my anxiety dream, it is the opening night of a play. I have a lead role and, you guessed it, I don't know my lines. Somehow in my dream logic, I gloss over the reality that I am usually prepared for most things. I don't notice how absurd it is that I only realized I didn't know my lines an hour before the curtain. In the moment, all I feel is the toxic mixture of panic and regret. The fault is entirely mine. How could I have done this to myself, and to those around me?

And then I wake up, and logic seeps back in, and I realize that it is precisely because I try to be prepared that I have dreams like this. None of us likes that feeling of being caught up short, in dreams or in real life. Very little in life is worse than knowing that it is too late for something, that we have missed our chance.

The realization that a relationship has deteriorated beyond the point of repair. The lung cancer diagnosis that comes just weeks after you finally decided to quit smoking, for good this time. The career path that got away. The parent who died before you had the chance to say, "I'm sorry, and I love you."

"Too late" stings so much, because we would have done something earlier, if only we had known what was going to happen. If only. Why do we love

time travel or alternate life movies so much? “Big” and “13 Going on 30,” “Peggy Sue Got Married,” “The Family Man” and “It’s a Wonderful Life.”

We love them because we all wish we could go back and fix all those “too late” moments. We wish we could live from the beginning with the perspective we only get at the end.

Our gospel reading today is Jesus’ warning about not being too late in living the Godly lives to which we are called. Jesus begins by dismissing the notion that natural disasters are punishment for sinners. This was a common belief in the ancient world, and some hold such ideas even today.

You may recall a certain TV evangelist blaming the Haitian people for the earthquake that struck them. But Jesus makes clear that God doesn’t cause disasters to punish the sinful: “those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them – do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?”

But then Jesus gets on to his main point: the time may be short for any one of us. Not because we are sinners, but because life is uncertain. None of us knows how much time we have to live. And that ought to give us a sense of urgency. Am I the person I want to be? The employee, daughter, father, Christian? If tomorrow were my last day, or next Monday, or the next, what would I want to do differently? What regrets would I have?

This season of Lent is all about cultivating in us a sense of hopeful urgency. Urgency, because Lent reminds us continually that this life is not endless. “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return,” we heard on Ash Wednesday, as the ashes were smudged on our foreheads. Urgency.

Very few of us feel truly ready to die when the time comes, but will we have lived a life holy and full enough to be at peace when God calls. Or

will we die, in the words of the Great Litany, “suddenly and unprepared?” These are not easy things to think about, but Lent asks us to do so.

This Lenten season itself ought to be taking on some urgency for us. This season is a metaphor for our life. Easter is only four weeks away. Are we ready? Have our Lenten disciplines opened our hearts to welcome the risen Christ? Are we ripe for the transformation he will bring? Do we want God’s new life, and are we prepared for it?

And yet, this is a season of hopeful urgency. When the owner of the vineyard wanted to cut down the fig tree that was not bearing fruit, the gardener asked for one more year, to tend to it and give it fertilizer.

Jesus is giving us comfort, and warning us at the same time. God is merciful. Like the owner of the vineyard, he gives us second and third chances, with every reasonable opportunity to bear good fruit in our lives. But that patience is not infinite. For each of us, the end will come, we know not when. Will we have good fruit to show for our time on earth?

We are halfway through Lent. How is it going, for you? If your Lenten disciplines have caved in already, if your Bible reading is stuck on Genesis 2, verse three, or you’ve lost that phone number to volunteer at ICM, or you really wanted to come to the Thursday night Lenten program, but you’ve missed the first two, if you intended to join our legacy circle, but haven’t done it yet, there is still time.

There is still time to get back on track, to turn away from our lesser selves, and towards the person God intends us to be. There is still time, and when we turn to God, we find not a harsh judge, but a loving gardener, wanting to tend to us and help us.

Remember Moses in our first reading today. Moses was terrified that he was inadequate to do what God asked of him. “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” But God reassured him: “I will be with you.” He even told him what to say the skeptical people of Israel.

God knows we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves. All God wants is for us to try, to feel the urgency, do our best and turn to God for the rest. And God will help us. What an amazing thing that this God, the same God who appeared to Moses in the burning bush, “I AM,” the God of Abraham and of Isaac, the God who walked the earth as Jesus, this same God cares about you and me.

This same God asks for our repentance and offers us help and health and true life. If only we would ask for it, before it is too late. Amen.