

Rev. Seth D. Bode †† Sermon 468 †† Lent 3

“Lord God, you have appointed me as a Bishop and Pastor in your Church, but you see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked your help, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon you: I wish to devote my mouth and my heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon your Word. Use me as your instrument -- but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all.”

“Sir, I would see Jesus.”

Luke 13

‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put fertilizer on it.’



I wish the world weren't falling apart. Scheming politics, war where East meets West, the prospect of chemical or nuclear warfare staring us in the face... Zelensky's video this week hurt to see. To watch the needless damaging of buildings and heart-wrenching loss of life. I imagined our buildings under attack. The world brings us numerous examples of people cut off suddenly—many by illness, water, fire, travel, hands, feet, and fists, blades, and bullets. One minute, people are strong and healthy; the next minute they are lost and gone.

Some of you ... I wish your world weren't falling apart. I know it has and is and seems to for some of you. There's no video for that. But someone knows. I know He knows. You do, too.

He has big warnings today, and also big promises. He knows when your world is falling apart, and He has the solution.

FLOURISH AS THE WORLD FALLS APART

This isn't the first time the world seemed like it was falling apart. In Jesus' time, the Jews with the news were bothered by some trouble. Pilate the governor had suddenly cut down some Galileans worshiping in the temple. Normally, Gentiles were forbidden to enter any but the great court of the Gentiles, under penalty of death, and warning signs made that obvious. That made this like a church

shooting, only by the government. Pilate didn't wait for the rules and rituals to end; blood and wine ran on the floor of the temple together that day.

The Jews with the news assumed a signal punishment. These Galileans must have committed some great sin for which God sent this violent death, this signal punishment, upon them through Pilate. The fact that these men suffered from the hands of Pilate is taken as evidence they had bigger sins and bigger guilt ...

In addition, Jesus suggests another tragedy that could feel even more from God. Take the obvious enemy out of it. Put Pilate aside and think about that tower that fell. Eighteen (18) men were crushed to death. Hence, should even direct judgments of God, lightning, storms, tornadoes, floods, etc. be interpreted as being sent because of greater guilt?

It's not our place to try and match God's punishments to this or that crime. As a rule, divine providence works in secret ways that are too mysterious for us to unravel. All calamities are meant to teach a general lesson. None of them would have ever happened had it not been for sin. Sin comes with collateral damage.

You, too, are sinners. What befell them may befall us. Every calamity that sweeps men away is a call from heaven to repent! Take it as God's warning to escape perishing forever by repenting in time. Sin is the cause of all evil in this world, and when it lashes out and dismantles our world, God is issuing an alert.

"It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God," Heb. 10:31.

When these things occur, we shouldn't try to do the math and discern what these people did to deserve this. Instead we should say, "What if that was me? Would I be ready to meet my Maker right now? Am I living my life in repentance—a change of heart and a change of mind 180 degrees the opposite direction of sin, hating my self-centeredness—or am I just drifting through life, sinning as much as the next person? "Hey, no big deal. So I wise crack and talk back and tell lies and don't apologize and give up on others and get by." Don't you want to stop that behavior, remold it, and look to God for help?

We need to remember that, if we want to figure this out, we're going to get it wrong. Like the people of Jesus' day, we are tempted to bargain with degrees of sin. We concern ourselves with being a special, better quality of sinner. We presume this brings about a less horrific death.

Sacrifices fail. Towers collapse. Governments destroy. Worlds fall apart. If you are caught up worshiping manmade towers, projects, and institutions, quit it.

Lent is not a call to be a more quality sinner. Lent is a call to repent; i.e., to have Jesus Himself work on your heart.

“Repent or perish.” Jesus has to tell us this. The terrors of conscience through the knowledge of sin—that’s contrition. Contrition is not something we manufacture; it is something we suffer. Then comes faith, the full trust that rests on Jesus’ forgiveness. This too is not produced by the sinner. Really, Jesus is offering—personally—to work on you, your attitude, your selfishness, your stubborn will, and your heart.

When He says *“Repent or perish,”* He really means *“Perish or flourish.”* How is that you could flourish? The Lord answers for them and for us, *“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, then cut it down’ ”* (6-9).

This vineyard owner wasn’t a bad man. He was patient and long-suffering. For three years He had this waste-of-space tree that refused to bear fruit. There was a vinedresser nearby, a gardener, to meet with the owner. This gardener pleaded for the tree. The gardener did not act and speak as a hired servant who merely carries out orders, for He was graciously concerned about the tree. He was this tree’s lifeline, its gardener of grace. So the gardener of grace persuaded the owner of the vineyard to wait.

The owner of the vineyard is God, and His vineyard may be defined as His Church or the salvation extended to the men on earth. The tree cannot stand for the invisible, universal church, since every tree in that vineyard is repentant and fruitful. Only God knows exactly who they are, since only God can look into the heart. This vineyard can’t mean unbelieving, unbaptized trees of the wild woodland. Instead, here Jesus was speaking about the bad and good together, the visible church.

What happened to the fig tree happens to all who are unfruitful Christians. God works on them in various ways; by other Christians, through crosses and afflictions, by the Law and the Gospel, ***their world falling apart***. If then in the end He decides that they must be cut off as useless, this verdict is eminently just. As the owner of the vineyard, He did what was necessary to be done, in order to make the tree fruitful and flourish. The fault was in the tree itself.

So Jesus patiently and faithfully works repentance in our hearts. When the world falls apart, Jesus alone pleads with the Father. He digs and works, and He fertilizes and feeds us. For the impenitent sinner, the gardener of grace asks an extension of time, that grace may do its utmost to win repentance. The tree is not only to have more time, it is to receive the gardener's intense care, "*till I dig around it and fertilize,*" aerate and enrich the soil. Nothing that is possible is left undone to bring the sinner to the fruit of repentance.

Let the world fall apart. Yet the question was and is for members of the church like us: Are we fruitful and flourishing or are we unproductive and fruitless? If you search your heart and know you were unproductive this past week, or slow to produce fruit, Jesus says to confess your sins and repent of your lukewarmness and lovelessness. Were you unproductive? Were you fruitless? Were you wicked? Have you thought about it? DO YOU KNOW?

We notice that, as it is the gardener of grace Himself who asks for time, so it is He who will work. It is Jesus Himself who uses every means of grace. He waters with baptismal promises and pours His body and blood into the task. He personally hoes away the stony heart and breaks all the cracks of character. The whole little world around that tree falls together. His Word fertilizes you with comfort and peace and His face shines warmly on you. In Jesus, the gardener of grace, God's threats and terror only last a moment. We are served and grow and flourish for a lifetime. God grant it in Jesus' name, Amen.