

In the shadow of Your wings

Psalm 63:1-8 • Luke 13:1-9

That scripture from Luke is one that challenges me a little. I'll almost use the weather as an excuse. I thought, Karen will be fine if I call her at 7 and say, "Eh, I'm not preaching. Can't make it. It's on you!" I didn't do that.

You think those people are worse sinners 'cause they died like that? Well, of course the answer is no. But then you get this thing: "repent". So that would suggest there must be something.

There must be something someone did. It's starting to sound like a theme, doesn't it? I'm beginning to hear myself repeating myself.

There are people in the congregation who know a whole lot more about pruning than I do. There are probably scholars who know a whole lot more about what the word "repent" means than I do. So I fall back on the one available skill I have to me, which is to tell a story. A very personal story. A story that I've been encouraged off and on throughout my ministry here to tell, but it didn't make sense to me, because you all already know who I am. Then I think, "Oh, maybe they don't..." So here's some of my story (you don't get it all):

When I was at the ripe old age of 24, I started my ministry. What did I know at 24? Well, then I thought I had a pretty good handle on it. And I did, in terms of ministry. I understood how to put together a good sermon. I understood how to be with people in all manner of different times in the unfolding of their lives. I somehow managed to have been given a gift whereby I was able to listen while people spoke, and as long as I didn't ever think about the pain I was in, things were good. But that started to unravel, and by the time I was about 26, I was going home at 11 in the morning from my office to have a drink. Fortunately, by the time I was 27, I realized that that was not going to be a good path.

Now here's what the word repentance means to me: it means you take a look at your life and you decide to go the other direction. Fortunately, I was in a congregation at the time where the M & P committee were a people of great grace. Who came to me mid-week and said, "Sally, we don't know what's going on. We don't need to know what's going on. We need you to take whatever amount of time you need to sort it out. And then come back and be for us the minister that we know you can be." Wow, what a gift. What a tremendous gift. And thus started my coming-out journey, which is sort of like...well, like Karen said this morning about Creation. It never ends, really. It's a continual process. It has a start point.

The changes that we make in our lives all have some sort of start point. Some beginning place where we say, "Ooh, I can't go on this way anymore." For some folks, it has been about orientation, obviously. For the need to simply choose to live as ourselves in the world. Well, isn't that what it is for all of us? Really, how is my story different from yours, yours, yours, really? At some point, repentance means choosing to live in accordance with fulfilling that which is at the core of who we are. So we repent of

all of the stuff that we've been told is the way we must live, and we take hold of God's call to be or to live how we need to live.

The fig tree is such a wonderful analogy, because I guess fig trees don't produce if they're not pruned. So it might be said that one of the most painful things that we assume that tree goes through is also the thing that allows for the greatest amount of growth and productivity. One of the most painful things that we as human beings go through might also be that which allows for the greatest growth and productivity. And the worst thing we can do is judge people because they're going through a painful time. Funny how we do that.

I'm getting older, so I forget which stories I've told in which congregation. So forgive me if you've heard this one before: I worked in hospital ministry, and I was called to be with a woman whose 17-year-old son had been in a hockey accident and was now paraplegic. Her faith community...her faith community, the people she should have been able to turn to, who loved and cared for her the most? Said, "If only you had enough faith, he'll get up and walk again." Oh, sure. At the time when we have people around us who are in their greatest pain, we often judge. She knew full well that her faith was the strongest it had ever been. Had she been pruned, or what? Of everything. Everything she had ever clung to suddenly disappeared in a moment, a second, and she turned and walked another direction. She found me and we talked for hours on end, during the time that she was there at the hospital with her son. I have no idea what happened after she left. Where they went, where they are now, how he's doing. It was one of the harder things for me about hospital ministry, actually. Is that people go home and you never had any further contact and you didn't know. But in that moment, she had a chance to look at everything she had been given through her life and say, "No. I must go this way. I must go this way."

Repentance, pruning, shedding, sloughing off all of the stuff that we don't need...throwing away the closet and stepping outside of it to embrace fully who we are in the shadow of God's wings. Who are you in the shadow of God's wings? Not as defined by the world or your parents or your grandkids or your spouse or...who are you in the shadow of God's wings? As God enfolds you, who do you become? We are called to live that life. We are called to be that people, We are called to live in that hope. Thanks be.