

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH**  
**COMPASS, PA**

March 20, 2022 – LENT 3, YEAR C

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*God Allows U-Turns*”\*

Exodus 3:1-15 (The Lord commissions Moses to deliver the Israelites out of Egypt)  
Psalm 63:1-8 (Our souls thirst for God, and cling to Him who has been our helper)  
1 Corinthians 10:1-13 (God will not allow us to be tempted beyond our strength)  
St. Luke 13:1-9 (Jesus calls us to repent while there is still time)

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“Unless you repent, you will all perish,” warns Our Lord Jesus in today’s Gospel lesson. There’s no soft-pedaling that message. Confess your sins and get right with God, *or else!* Possibly, some of us have been coasting a bit since Ash Wednesday. We’re taking our time getting around to the repentance to which God is calling us in this season. “Oh, I still have a few more weeks,” we say to ourselves. Maybe. Maybe not. None of us knows when our life may be suddenly taken from us, as Jesus illustrates in His story about the Galileans who were executed, or those on whom a tower at Siloam collapsed, killing them all. Possibly, some of us are putting off the repentance God requires because we’re not certain what it involves.

Well, according to Scripture, repentance is an inward movement of the heart. It is an act of the will, in which we choose to regret our sinful thoughts, words, and deeds. We *know* we have offended God and our neighbors, and we *are* truly, sincerely sorry.

But this should not be confused with the changed life that is meant to proceed from our having repented. The outward signs, the fruits of repentance are: Confessing our sins to God that we may be forgiven, making reparation for the wrongs we have committed, and living differently.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus calls His disciples’ attention to the need for repentance that results in a changed life, by criticizing the fig tree for not having borne fruit. And yet, as harsh as Christ’s words may seem, nevertheless, He does not destroy the fruitless tree. Once again, we see here the unfathomable mercy of God.

Although the tree deserves to be cut down, the gardener begs the Master to leave it for another year, to give it an additional opportunity to bear fruit. If the tree could have talked, I’m sure it would have thanked the gardener for His mercy—and hopefully, it would have put more effort into bearing the fruit expected of it!

The Bible is filled with examples of people who trusted in God, asked for His mercy, and received it: We find this in the Psalms of David; in the faith of Abraham and Moses who pleaded and “bargained” with God; in Jesus’ tale of the man whose friend had compassion on him in the middle of the night and lent him some bread; the persistent widow who secured justice from the unjust judge; the Canaanite woman who “argued” with Jesus about her right to His mercy; and the witness of His mother Mary, whose appeal for mercy at Cana led Christ to perform His first public miracle, thereby launching His ministry.<sup>2</sup>

Yes, God *is* merciful, and He *does* give us first, second, and even *third* chances to acknowledge our sins, to repent of them, to confess them and be forgiven, and then to live lives changed by that repentance and absolution. But God’s patience is not infinite. We see in the Old Testament how God finally ran out of patience with the faithless Israelites. Even Moses himself was denied entrance into the Promised Land because he defied God and tried to do things his own way, trying to get water out of the rock at Meribah. Later, Judah and Israel were both exiled to Babylon for generations, as punishment for worshipping idols and engaging in pagan practices.

The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*, which means “a change of direction.” I thought about this when I read about a village in a remote section of Labrador, Canada, called Wabush. The hamlet had been completely isolated for some time. But recently a road was cut through the wilderness to reach it. Wabush now has one road leading into it, and therefore, only on one road leading out of it. To get to Wabush, you have to travel this unpaved road for six to eight hours. But once you’ve arrived, there’s only one way out—you have to turn around.

Each of us, at birth, arrives in a town called Sin. And, as in the case of Wabush, there is only one way out—we have to travel the road laid down by Christ Himself. But in order to take that road, we have to make a U-turn. That complete about-face is what Jesus means by the fruit of repentance, the *evidence* that we are serious about living differently. Without it, there’s no way out of town.<sup>3</sup>

There’s a saying, “Many people use mighty thin thread when mending their ways.”<sup>4</sup> The thing is, we can’t just fudge our way out of sin. The trouble with sin is it recurs, *constantly*, just like weeds in our gardens. Ever notice that, if you are sincerely conscious before God of your failings and shortcomings, they’re pretty much always the same ones? Whether it’s a critical spirit that pops up just when you thought you might actually be a nice person; or the recurring temptation to drink when you swore you’d get sober; or a wandering eye, even though you know you love your spouse with all your heart. Whatever it may be that teases, tempts, tricks, and trips us up, it’s usually the same thing.

That’s just how we humans are wired. And because we keep bumping up against the same junk, over and over, in our hearts, minds, and lives, sometimes we figure God is tired of listening, and we give up repenting. Or we get despondent because even though we’ve repented and been forgiven—time after time—we feel we just can’t stop committing that sin, no matter how hard we try.

Ah, but God doesn’t give up on us, no matter how often or how much we backslide—as long as we ask His forgiveness. When Peter asked Jesus how many times we ought to forgive one another, Jesus told him “seventy times seven.” In other words, an infinite amount of times.

God *will* keep on forgiving us for a long, long, time. But Jesus also lets us know in today’s Gospel that even God runs out of patience at some point. So wouldn’t it be better to do everything in our power to change how we live, now, rather than later?

Yes, we will face temptation again and again, but that’s the time to pray with all our might—and run as fast as we can in the opposite direction—before we’re overtaken by that same old sin. And, as we are running, we should fall right into the loving arms of our Heavenly Father, throwing ourselves upon the mercy of God. Remember “The Jesus Prayer” I taught you? “*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me a sinner.*” In God’s presence we can find safety and forgiveness.

God will be patient with us, as long as we continue to turn to Him, asking for His mercy. The way I read Scripture, when God runs out of patience and starts punishing His people is when they stop caring that they are sinning, doing wrong, and offending His holiness. When they stop repenting and asking for His forgiveness. When they dig in their heels and say, “I’m going to do it my way, no matter what,” or, “Who really cares, anyway?”

Therefore, let us not become so discouraged by our shortcomings and weaknesses that we become hardened to them and give up repenting. Rather, let us continually plead with the Lord for His mercy, that we may receive grace to live the holy lives to which Christ calls us—and that others may come to Him through our example. Jesus Himself appealed to God with loud cries, in the Garden of Gethsemane. And although He suffered greatly soon after, when He was nailed to the cross, God’s mercy was given in Christ’s subsequent Resurrection. Just so, the mercy of God can give *us* new life, here and now. Today is the day to claim that grace, with Jesus’ help. *Amen.*

<sup>2</sup> Adapt. N. George-Hacker, 3 March 2013, St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

<sup>1</sup> Adapt. L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (Wm. Eerdmans, 1996) p. 487.

<sup>3</sup> “Asking for His Mercy,” *TheDivineMercy.org*, <<http://thedinemercy.org/message/spirituality/prayer.php>> 11 February 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Adapt. Brian Weatherdon, “Repentance,” *SermonIllustrations.com* <<http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/r/repentance.htm>> 2 March 2013.

<sup>4</sup> “Repentance,” *Daily Walk*, qtd. *SermonIllustrations.com* <<http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/r/repentance.htm>> 2 March 2013.