



## Theologies of Repentance

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Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

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In this Lenten journey exploring healing we've been invited to have courage to see things as they are, to lament and now to repent. The gospel is frank about it - repent or die is pretty much its synopsis. So let's explore.

It seems a gospel of two halves. The first half is harsh and hard to hear, perhaps especially when images of destruction and death in Ukraine are before us. Not to mention the plethora of other issues tearing and injuring our world, separating and dividing us. Jesus is questioned by people trying to understand tragic events. They do so in ways to attribute blame. Jesus' response is blunt, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ... Or 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?"

Just as we do, the questioners wanted to make sense of what had happened. They brought a framework of meaning making probably, like us, to have it affirmed. Commentators suggest their questioning expressed theology shaped by Deuteronomy which "had gained wide currency by Jesus' day. [This theology] asserted that obedience to the Torah brought blessings, but disobedience brought

a curse.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus rejects this human way of framing what had happened. Some had died because of human intent, others because a tower had collapsed. The deaths had happened but weren’t contingent on punishment for sin, or guilt.

When we witness suffering, whether human, planetary or creaturely, it causes us pain. It’s too overwhelming to live in the presence of such pain. So, quite sensibly, we acquire methods and means to manage and to cope.

One way we do this is to rationalize, to try to make logical sense of things. We create scenarios of cause and effect, outcomes consequent to actions. Just as we hear in today’s gospel, ‘this happened because of sin, the guiltiest are the most sinful.’ It rationalizes the scenario, controls the unreasonable for us. God punishes because of sin, those who sin get their just deserts.

In doing so, we move the source of pain from our heart to our head. We take charge, it empowers us to regain control and make sense of the senseless. It alleviates our terror of being vulnerable and powerless in a random world.

Recently I came across this quote attributed to Einstein, “I fear the day that technology will surpass our human interaction. The world will have a generation of idiots.” We live in times where technology is close to, if not already surpassing our human interaction. The effect of being technologically ‘plugged in’ is we’re exposed to and inundated with information curated especially for us, according to our clicks and swipes. Constantly we’re bombarded by hard and difficult information. It escalates in us a sense of being connected yet in isolation from human interaction, of being engaged yet safely protected from any actual experience.

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<sup>1</sup>Bartlett, D. L. and B Brown Taylor, ed. *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2, Lent through Eastertide*. WJK. (2009), 95

Have you noticed when disruptive or catastrophic events are taking place in our world, or in our own backyard, that, even if they are horrifying and disturbing, we can't help but watch? Despite the distress caused, it's sort of addictive, we want to see and know we tell ourselves. I wonder, paradoxically, whether we derive some sort of voyeuristic pleasure out of witnessing. The horrors we witness hurt but are far away and not us. The ones committing them are other than us, a long way from us physically and, surely, motivationally and mentally.

'Mad', 'Unhinged', 'gone down the rabbit hole of disinformation', 'climate deniers,' we adopt such catch cries to discredit and to justify and ease our discomfort. When pain is attributable and reasonable and 'over there', it belongs to somebody else. Even so and despite all our artful dodging and defensive screening, we're never fully immune, we do experience the ripples.

Then we ask, "How can we contribute to change?"

It comes back to story-lines again. About what we tell ourselves is true, or maybe, who we understand is the truth teller. We prefer to align ourselves with the truth teller in our stories.

We prefer to 'other' people who propound truths that are distasteful to us, perhaps rightfully so, should their dialogues be death bringing. Yet their truths and truth tellers are as dear to them as ours are to us. And it may be that such dialogues we declare death bringing are forged by a history of injustice, oppression and pain we've featured in.

'Othering' helps us to manage but, I'd contest, it also masks our part in, our responsibility for things being the way they are and, perhaps unconsciously, contributing to them staying this way. Ways that alienate deprive life, much less equality of life to people and our planet. It suits us for it to be this way.

What we witness in Ukraine, in Africa, in Syria, here in NZ reflects the landscape of our human capabilities - from acts of abject horror to acts of blessed compassion and open handed generosity. It's a map of us too.

Left unexamined, are we quite aware of the ripples of influence we generate in the world, our butterfly effect?

Is all lost, is this a story of despair? I suggest not.

As I said this is a gospel of two halves. The second half depicts the unlikely persuasion of the gardener. When fertile land is a scarce resource, three years of barrenness is more than enough to warrant the removal of the fig tree. The gardener's plea is heeded, to tend, to till and to feed so roots have chance to grow deep into the soil and humus of divine grounding, for the tree to be fruitful, bear fruit, be food in a world starving to receive it.

The questions asked of Jesus arose from theology formed by Deuteronomy, a narrative of influence. But arising also at similar time in history of the Judaic storyline is Isaiah. It's beautiful poetry we heard today, created for abundance and inclusion and generous welcome, we're patterned to walk this way, should we choose. The life of our world is sustained and upheld by more than human agency.

As we journey this season of repentance let us be aware of the theologies imprinted in us. Theologies that bind us to a narrative of guilt, we repent out of fear of a God who punishes or rewards. And theologies that invite us to remember, to return to who we are: deeply beloved, desired and intended. The ways and wisdom of God exceed our capacity and reveal another way unable to be diminished by us. Should we choose to repent, return, to listen and drink our fill of such sustenance, we choose to participate in making this way of healing real in our world.