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**“Repentance and Thirst”
A sermon by Martha Moore-Keish**

**Third Sunday in Lent
March 7, 2010
Isa. 55:1-9; Lk. 13:1-9**

“Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” These do not sound like happy, life-giving words. In fact, they are not words that we usually associate with Jesus at all, but with his wild-eyed cousin John, who ate locusts and honey and lived (understandably) far from civilized society. These are words we associate with cartoon figures in shaggy beards and robes, wearing signboards that say “Repent, for the time is near.” These are laughable words, words that those other people use, words that are naïve, impolite, offensive.

“Unless you repent, you will all perish.” Yet here are these words, uttered by Jesus himself not once, but twice in the gospel lesson for today. To follow up, he tells a particularly strange and disturbing parable: there was a fig tree which did not bear any fruit. The owner of the tree came by and ordered it to be cut down, but the gardener intervened, asking for one

more year to fertilize and tend it, in hopes that it will bear fruit. The gardener concludes, “If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

The message seems clear: repent or die.

And this is good news?

To try to understand what Jesus is saying here, it helps to remember that “repent” simply means “turn around.” In the early church, those preparing for baptism often did this physically when they came to make their final promises before being baptized and received into the church. They would be asked to renounce Satan and all his ways, and to affirm Christ as Lord and Savior. As they did this, they physically turned from the west (the direction of night, and thus death, and evil) and toward the east (the place of the rising sun, and thus associated with the risen Son of God). In their very bodies, they “repented”, they turned around, marking a change from the old ways of death to the new way of life in Christ.

Maybe we don’t occupy that world anymore, but we still know what it means to turn around, to turn away from paths that lead to death, and to turn to ways that lead to life. Here’s a simple example: this January, I spent a week in Nashville at a conference, at the end of which I had to drive back home to Atlanta. The weekend I had to drive home happened to be the

same weekend that the blizzard hit the whole mid-Atlantic region. I bet you remember it. So Saturday morning I drove my car out of the garage where it had been parked all week, and turned onto a treacherous, icy road to make my way home. I turned left. I was headed uphill, on a sheet of ice, in a car with no four wheel drive. Gradually I inched my way up to the next intersection, at which point, a lone shaggy gentleman on the corner began to gesture wildly in my direction, trying to tell me to turn around. I could imagine what he was saying: “repent or perish!” Crazy man, I thought to myself. Briefly. Then I realized: not only was I headed uphill on an icy road in a small vehicle with little traction, but I was also headed the wrong way on a one way road.

Repent or perish, indeed. I turned around. There are some ways that really can lead to death, some times when we really do need to turn around—for our own safety, for our own life.

But calls to repentance are not always so straightforward, and patterns of death-dealing behavior not always so easy to change. In her most recent novel called simply *Home*, author Marilynne Robinson describes the life of a man named Jack Boughton, who struggles with repentance from the beginning to the end of the book. He is an alcoholic, who fathered and abandoned a child early in his life, left his family, and

consistently brings grief to his parents, brothers, and sisters. In the story, he returns to his home for a time, to live with his dying father and middle-aged sister Glory, and to try to change his ways. At one point he says suddenly to Glory, “So. Are you going to try to save my soul, little sister?”

“What?” [she says] “Save your soul? Why would I do that?”

“Why not? It seems like a genteel occupation for a pious lady. I thought you might want to do me that kindness. Since you have a little time on your hands.” . . .

She said, “I’d be happy to oblige, but I have no idea how to go about it.”

“Well,” he said, “I’m willing to confess to a certain spiritual hunger. I think that’s usually the first step. So that’s out of the way. . . . Then I think it is usual to ponder great truths. That has been my experience.”

“Such as?”

“The fatherhood of God, for one. The idea being that the splendor of creation and of the human creature testify to a gracious intention lying behind it all, that they manifest divine mercy and love. . . .” After a moment he said, “It is possible to know the great truths without feeling the truth of them. That’s where the problem lies. In my case.”¹

¹ *Home*, p. 104.

Jack has a kind of hunger for repentance, but he struggles to change his ways. He shows us the aching truth that there are real ways that do lead to death, that there are paths of life that do indeed bring pain to others and fail to satisfy the inmost longing of the human heart. He confesses to a “certain spiritual hunger”, but he is at a loss to nourish that real hunger himself.

Jack presents to us a different face of repentance. This is not a call to repentance that comes with the threat of punishment from outside, but an inner hunger, or thirst, for a changed life. His confession of spiritual hunger echoes a theme from the Isaiah reading today: “Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters: and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!” And later: “eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.” Isaiah names the longing of the people in terms of hunger and thirst. Clearly, the prophet here is talking also about repentance, for he says, “let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them ***return to the Lord***, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”

Turn from the ways that lead to death, says Isaiah. Turn to God, who gives life, and mercy, and pardon. Repent, so that you will not perish.

The season of Lent has long been associated with repentance. When Lent first developed in the third and fourth centuries, it was primarily a season of baptismal preparation, of teaching and praying with those who were preparing to enter fully into the community through the waters of life. But it soon became also a season of repentance for those who had been estranged from the community for various reasons. During these weeks, people who needed to be reconciled with the church would devote time to repentance in order to be received back into the church's good graces at Easter. That is why the practices of fasting and prayer, of confession and self-examination became associated with this liturgical season.

There are dangers here, of course. We can focus too much on repentance in a way that makes sanctification all about us, about our hard work, rather than the gracious work of the Holy Spirit through us. We can adopt heroic disciplines that call attention to our efforts rather than keeping our eyes on the mystery of Christ who was crucified but who has also already risen.

There are dangers in talking about repentance. Yet Jesus himself in this passage calls the disciples to repent, and we have to wrestle with these words sometime. Perhaps devoting a liturgical season to such wrestling is not such a bad thing after all.

“Repent or perish.” In one way, this call is simply descriptive of our lives.

- When we get caught up in destructive patterns that sap the life from ourselves and others, we need to turn around. We need to repent.
- When we are going the wrong way down an icy one way street, we need to turn around. We need to repent.
- When we enter into destructive or abusive relationships,
- when we feed our addictions,
- when we devote all our energy to work and have nothing left to give the ones whom we love most,
- when we pour all our energy into our families and forget the rest of the world beyond the walls of our home, we need to pause and turn around. We need to repent.

“Unless you repent, you will all perish.” Chilling words they may be, but whether in Lent or in another season, they are words we need to consider carefully. Of what do **we** need to repent?

Unless we turn from the ways of death, we may indeed perish. But the good news is that Jesus does not just leave us there. Remember that fig tree. It is barren, useless, good for nothing but firewood. It would be better

to cut it down and plant something new, and this is exactly what the owner wants to do. But someone, a gardener, intervenes. “Let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.” The fig tree is not putting forth the effort here; the gardener is.

In this season of Lent, we are not just working hard at our own repentance. We are not going to accomplish our salvation by ourselves, through our own mighty efforts. We repent first of all by putting ourselves in the hands of the gardener, who is at work digging up, aerating the packed earth around our roots, mixing in the compost, nudging us back toward life. In this community, at this table, through the Word and prayer and fellowship, the Gardener is working to nourish us. We do not repent on our own. Jesus calls us to repentance, and Jesus also nurtures us toward repentance, feeding us with rich food, satiating our thirst, pouring out wine and milk without money and without price so that our parched lives may bear fruit after all.

Repentance, our repentance, is not the end of the story. “Repent or perish,” teaches Jesus, and we need to listen. Yet we also know the astonishing news on the far side of the story: that even if we do perish, in

Christ we know that God brings forth life out of death. Redemption comes on the far side of the grave.

Jack Boughton wrestles mightily with repentance, and I will leave you to read the book to see if you think he finally does turn around. But this much I will say: at the end of the story, Marilynne Robinson hints at a redemption beyond the repentance of Jack, a hope that is beyond what can be manifest in any individual life.

“Let them return to the Lord,” sings Isaiah, “that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” For this incomprehensible mercy, shown in the gardener who feeds us and quenches our thirst, who calls us and leads us along the pathway of repentance, let us give thanks. **Amen.**

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