March 24, 2019
Third Sunday in Lent 2019: “REPENT … and Be Prepared”
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Reading 1 Exodus 3:1-8A, 13-15
Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian. Leading the flock across the desert, he came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There an angel of the LORD appeared to Moses in fire flaming out of a bush. As he looked on, he was surprised to see that the bush, though on fire, was not consumed. So Moses decided, “I must go over to look at this remarkable sight, and see why the bush is not burned.”

When the LORD saw him coming over to look at it more closely, God called out to him from the bush, “Moses! Moses!” He answered, “Here I am.” God said, “Come no nearer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. I am the God of your fathers,” he continued, “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.” Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. But the LORD said, “I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians and lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Moses said to God, “But when I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ if they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what am I to tell them?” God replied, “I am who am.” Then he added, “This is what you shall tell the Israelites: I AM sent me to you.”

God spoke further to Moses, “Thus shall you say to the Israelites: The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. “This is my name forever; thus am I to be remembered through all generations.”

Reading 2 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12
I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea, and all of them were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. All ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they drank from a spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was the Christ. Yet God was not pleased with most of them, for they were struck down in the desert.

These things happened as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil things, as they did. Do not grumble as some of them did, and suffered death by the destroyer. These things happened to them as an example, and they have been written down as a warning to us, upon whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore, whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall.

Some people told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. Jesus said to them in reply, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were greater sinners than all other Galileans? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did! Or those eighteen people who were killed when the tower at Siloam fell on them— do you think they were more guilty than everyone else who lived in Jerusalem? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!”

And he told them this parable: “There once was a person who had a fig tree planted in his orchard, and when he came in search of fruit on it but found none, he said to the gardener, ‘For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none. So cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?’ He said to him in reply, ‘Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future. If not you can cut it down.”
HOMILY

On this third Sunday of Lent –
You know what Jesus meant –
To again begin, turn away from sin –
The word for today is … REPENT!

When I was growing up with 4 younger brothers and a sister, if one of us did something wrong and others would find out about it, they would often say, “Mom (or Dad) is going to punish you for that.” Occasionally, we’d hear instead, “God’s going to punish you for that.” Similar words about God’s wrath would also be reinforced by some adults who may have just been misinformed, but who were probably trying to keep us on good behavior also – yeah, good luck, with 5 boys. Some years later, when every Friday was still meatless, and not just during Lent, a college friend said to me one day something like, “I wanted to prove that God wasn’t going to strike me down for deliberately doing something wrong … so I ate meat last Friday … and a bolt of lightning didn’t hit me.” I was taken by surprise and didn’t know how to respond, so we dropped the discussion quickly. How would you have responded to that situation?

When Jesus walked the earth, people commonly associated violent or sudden outcomes with guilty behavior: violent, such as when Pilate had some Galileans killed when they went to offer sacrifice … or sudden, such as when the tower at Siloam fell and eighteen people were killed. But, even today, despite Jesus’ Gospel words, how often do we have similar thoughts, how often have we judged others when we hear of their misfortunes. We might think, “Well, he (or she) led such a terrible life, it’s no wonder such a terrible thing happened to him (or her).” Or, how about the more familiar saying, “Why does God let bad things happen to such good, or innocent, people?” In the inner corners of our minds, we may have that mistaken feeling that God only loves those who are innocent or who keep His commandments … and for those who don’t, well, maybe God loves them less, or maybe not at all …

You know what Jesus meant –
When He told us to REPENT –
He wants us all in, turn away from sin –
Before our life is done and all spent.

Jesus didn’t answer those theological mysteries in today’s Gospel passage. We live in a broken world, and we certainly don’t know God’s Plan in situations such as those, but our hope and prayer is that our all-loving God will have some good come from every outcome … no matter how sudden, or violent, or unexplainable. Jesus did tell the people around Him, and us today, that we should always be prepared, be prepared for our last moments on earth. It’s something we generally don’t like to think about … it’s uncomfortable to be reminded of our human frailty, our finite lifespan, and so we tend to delay, to put off being ready, being prepared. A few months ago, an elderly friend told me that he was concerned about some recent ambiguous lab results. It took some time for him to reach his doctor so he researched the results online and almost convinced himself that he had to get his life in order … and very soon. The more he researched the matter, the worse his fears snowballed … until finally his doctor assured him of a more positive outlook. He told me that he learned a great deal – to be prepared, to get his life in order and to trust more in God.

Getting life in order – let’s look at that a bit more. There’s the personal aspect of our life, including family, friends and others … financial, including our own and others we impact … communal, and our impact on the wider community … and let’s not forget spiritual. So, how about that spiritual life
we each live and how prepared do we think we really are? An honest, spiritual self-assessment would be a great start to look for weaknesses and other areas that could be improved. After all, we might think we’re doing “OK” in this category, but is “OK” good enough? If we truly love someone, what does “OK” or even “good enough” mean to describe that relationship? There’s an interesting series of commercials for a mobile service (go figure!) on television lately where the punchline is, “Just OK is not OK.” In one particular setting, a hospital patient is nervously lying in bed and his wife asks the nurse if she’s ever worked with the surgeon scheduled to operate on her husband. The nurse replies, “Oh, yeah, he’s ok.” The surgeon then walks happily into the room, and sing-songs to all there, “Guess who just got reinstated? Well, not officially. Nervous? Yeah, me too. Don’t worry – we’ll figure it out.” There’s similar spots with a babysitter who is about to watch the kids [can you imagine THAT one], a car mechanic who’s fixing brakes – you get the picture, and the message, “Just OK is not OK.” So, regarding our relationship with God, who we hope to spend eternity with, who will always love us and who truly wants us to love Him also, is it just an “OK” relationship, one which needs some work, some improvement? What would our all-knowing, all-loving and all-merciful God say about that relationship? Remember that any sin affects our relationship with God, and we break that relationship with serious sin. God never turns away from us; we turn away from God when we sin.

Getting back to our self-assessment, it might include more than a feel-good checklist but, rather, a real examination of conscience. There are several good booklets or CD’s available that could help. The self-assessment would probably include the sacrament of Reconciliation, especially if that hasn’t happened in some time, or if there is serious sin involved. Some years back, someone told me that they hadn’t gone to Confession in more than 30 years – besides satisfying the need to confess serious sin, the sacrament also offers additional graces and opportunities to settle conscience issues and provide answers. The self-assessment would probably include an examination of areas in life that struggle with Jesus’ command to love God and neighbor, or those personal beliefs which disagree with some Church teachings, derived from the earliest teachings of the Church, the Church which Jesus founded. Regarding that talk I had with my college buddy, I now know how to answer him. I now know that these teachings are in place to help us, to help us improve our relationship with God and others and to become better disciples. Remember that acts of disobedience just get easier if they’re somehow rationalized away. If we don’t understand something, now is the time to find answers to our doubts, our misunderstandings, our faith challenges. Jesus is saying to be prepared and God has given us this time to do that – this time, now, while we can. And our all-loving God, who wants the best for each of us, and who will always love us no matter what, has sent His only Son, Jesus, to be the gardener who wants to help you, me and each of us, to bear not just fruit, but great fruit, to enjoy our life the way He intended, to improve our relationship with God, to be good examples to others, to be good disciples and lead others to Him. And, our all-merciful God, who wants a great relationship with each of us, is going to continue to give us extra chances to bear that fruit for as long as we live.

On this third Sunday of Lent –
You know what Jesus meant –
When He told us to REPENT –
He wants us all in, turn away from sin–
To do what we can, to begin again –
This Jesus, our brother, teacher and friend –
Whom our all-loving, all-merciful God sent.