

✠ LUKE 13:1-9 ✠

In Nomine Iesu

In a field one summer's day a Grasshopper was hopping about, chirping and singing to its heart's content. An Ant walked by, grunting as he carried a plump kernel of corn. "Where are you off to with that heavy thing?" asked the Grasshopper.

Without stopping, the Ant replied, "To our ant hill. This is the third kernel I've delivered today."

"Why not come and sing with me," said the Grasshopper, "instead of working so hard?"

"I am helping to store food for the winter," replied the ant, "and think you should do the same."

"Why bother about winter?" said the Grasshopper, "we have plenty of food right now."

But the Ant went on his way and continued his work. The weather soon turned cold. All the food lying in the field was covered with a thick white blanket of snow that even the Grasshopper could not dig through. Soon the Grasshopper found himself dying of hunger.

He staggered to the Ant's hill and saw the ants handing out corn from the stores they had collected in the summer. Then the Grasshopper knew, albeit too late, that it is best to prepare for the days to come.

Aesop's fable of the Ant and the Grasshopper relays an important message to children and adults alike: prepare for the future lest you suffer for your lack of foresight. In much the same way, our Lord's parable of the fig tree offers this warning: repent now while you can before you are cut down and thrown into the fire, where there will be gnashing of teeth, where the fire is not quenched, and the worm does not die.

In Aesop's fable, the Grasshopper tempted fate. He postponed doing what would have surely saved his life until it was too late to do anything about it. Similarly, our Lord warns us not to tempt God in refusing to repent and turn to Him. Do not think to yourself, "I can repent tomorrow, right now I want to sin ... I can love God later, right now I want to indulge my fleshly lusts ... I'll go to the Lord's Supper now, so that everyone thinks I believe like they believe and will think that I'm a good Christian, but I really think this is pointless and archaic."

In the wilderness, the nation of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron that they were going to die in the desert, and so God's wrath burned against them and He sent a plague among them. Fourteen thousand and seven hundred people died in that plague before God lifted His hand of judgment. They did not fear, love, and trust in God above all things, and they perished for it.

A little later the people of Israel again grumbled to Moses that they were going to perish in the wilderness, that they would have been better off in the land of Egypt, slaves to the taskmaster, and the Lord sent serpents among them whose bite was fatal, a consequence of rebelling against the Holy One of Israel. And yet again the Lord provided relief and had Moses

construct a snake of bronze and put it up on a pole, that whoever would look at it would not die from the bite of the viper.

Israel's history is full of narratives that tell of the judgment of God on the people who denied His rule, spurned His rebuke, laughed at His prophets, rejected His Law, forsook His commandments, and otherwise rejected God. And of these plagues and punishments, the apostle says, "These things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did." Examples for us! Jesus asked the question, "Do you think that those Galileans were worse sinners because of what Pilate did to them? By no means. Do you think that those on whom the tower fell were worse sinners because of their fate? No. But I tell you," the Lord says, "that you will suffer the same fate if you do not repent."

Those in the wilderness of Sinai who were bitten by the vipers all had the same poison of death in their veins, and they all had the same promise of salvation: look upon the bronze serpent and you will live. If one did not believe that looking at the bronze snake would heal him or her of the viper's venom, then they would not look, and they would die. God's remedy didn't depend upon the holiness or righteousness of the person bit. It did not depend upon anything man did. The remedy was always there; always ready to be received by those who believed. The remedy of the bronze serpent depended solely upon the promise of God that whoever looked at it would live. Only the lack of faith condemned those who did not believe. Just as our Lord says, "Whoever does not believe shall be condemned" (Mark 16:16).

"Yes, pastor, that is the old Lutheran mantra, 'we are saved by faith alone.'" Yes, by faith alone, but as our Lord's parable shows us, that faith is not alone. As the apostle James writes, "Faith without works is dead," (James 2:26). That is, it is not enough to say that you believe; *act* like you believe. What good would it have done one of those in the wilderness, bitten by the serpents, infected by the viper's venom, to say, "I believe; I believe!" yet not look upon the bronze serpent? In the same way, it does you no good to say, "I believe; I believe!" and not daily cling to your Baptism; confessing that you are sinful and unclean and that the cross of Christ is your only hope for salvation. Do not be like the fig tree that did not produce fruit. In the end it will be cut down and thrown into the fire. Repent.

"But, pastor, I don't really need to repent. I am faithful in my church attendance. I'm faithful in my tithing and church service. I am a good Christian. I don't cheat on my spouse or my taxes. For that matter, pastor, why do you continue to preach as if we're a bunch of sinners? We're Christians!" Yes, you are. But what is a Christian except one who confesses that they are sinful creatures, objects of God's wrath, condemned in their very nature; and that Jesus is the Righteous One of God, sinless and pure, dying as the substitute for our deaths? Christianity is not wrapped up in morality, for that is the way of works righteousness. Christianity is wrapped up in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Yet it is true that the Tempter is always there, baiting you; egging you on to do this or that little sin. The deadly viper will whisper in your eager ear, "Don't worry about this one little lie, it won't hurt anyone, it's a white lie." Don't listen; that lie will cost you your soul.

He will infect you with his venom: "Stop fretting over your occasional pornographic night out on the computer, it's not like your actually cheating on your wife, or even married." Rebuke the devil and he will flee from you, do not test the Lord your God, you will pay the toll for your addictions with your life.

But it is equally true that there is more than that. It is not merely that we confess daily

sins, for as the psalmist says, “Who can discern the error of his ways?” (Psalm 19:12). It is that we confess that without Christ, apart from Christ, we are hopelessly lost and condemned. Jesus is not a Duracell battery, giving us the energy to be righteous. He is our righteousness. That is what it means to repent and be baptized. Not just a repentance of manifest sins – hatred, theft, lying, fornication, and the like, for on this side of glory we will all commit such evils – but also a repentance of who we are in our sinful nature: lost and condemned persons, deserving of God’s wrath. Don’t think you have no sin to confess, for you are sinful. Beware, or did you not hear the warning of St. Paul, “Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.”

Repent. But do not merely be sorry for your actions that are sin. Contrition is certainly good, but how many murderers regret their murders but continue to kill? How many children know that lying is wrong, but cannot help but twist the truth to make themselves sound better to others? It is not enough to feel sorry for your sins; you must turn to God. This is what it means to repent and be baptized. That is, repent of your idolatry of self and turn to God as your salvation and righteousness.

For thus says the Lord, “As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezekiel 22:11). Those who think themselves righteous will live by that righteousness, and in the Day of the Lord they will find that their righteousness is worth nothing. The wicked, though, who confess their wickedness and turn to the Lord, their iniquity will not be upon them and their transgressions will be forgiven.

God is faithful and just, and He will cleanse you from all unrighteousness. There is no temptation that is not common to man, yet God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability. That is, He will not let the devil have you. He has put His name upon your heart and has called you His own. He has adopted you as sons and daughters, and will vouch for your safety. You need not rest in your holiness or righteousness, for you have none, but rest in the promise of the Almighty, that He has provided for you the way of escape. He has provided the cure for the poison of sin coursing through your veins. Not a bronze serpent hung upon a pole, but His Son, hung upon the cross.

At the cross, your sins, O Israel, have been atoned for; they have been forgiven and forgotten. And so we come and eat the Body and Blood of our Savior, Jesus. Not simply for the forgiveness of this or that manifest sin, but so that we are fed the righteousness of God in Christ that we may be counted as righteous.

Jesus toiled and worked, storing up righteousness in the house of God, while you, the Grasshoppers, played and sang and didn’t give a care as to the future. But instead of letting you perish on an empty belly, our Lord feeds you the righteousness of His Body and the holiness of His Blood. He gives you the food that sustains you through the winter of sin and guilt. He cares for you and provides for you. He is just and good. And He loves you. You are His and He will not let you die under the temptation, but will deliver you from evil. For His is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever and ever.

In the name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT.

✠ AMEN ✠