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

THE BIG WOW

It's hard to think of the season of Lent as a "fun" season. Unlike Advent or Christmas or Easter, Lent is not typically an upbeat, fun, or joy-filled season. And that is because much of the focus during Lent is on *repentance*. And quite honestly, how many of us think of repentance as anything fun? Repentance is an old fashioned word that seems out of sync with a modern era that is too often focused on getting, and having, and enjoying, and pleasing ourselves. Repentance is something we associate with fire and brim-stone preachers, who rail against us and our behaviors and try to make us feel bad about ourselves.

Well, I'm not a fire and brim-stone preacher so I'm not going to do that to you. But I am going to invite us to nevertheless take a fresh look at repentance. Maybe repentance is not as awful as we think. And maybe, maybe there is even something *joyful* about repentance. Writer Frederick Buechner states that, "True repentance spends less time look at the past and saying 'I'm sorry,' than to the future and saying, 'Wow!'"

Now think about that! Repentance is looking to the future and saying "Wow!" Wow at who I might be. Wow at what God can do with my life. Wow at what our communities and world might look like. Wow! Wow is a sentiment of wonder, astonishment, joy, enthusiasm, and hope.

That is the sentiment we find in the passage from Isaiah. The people of God have been held captive in Babylon where they have been heartsick for their homeland. But Isaiah tells them that soon they will be set free to go home. And this homecoming is not only a physical homecoming. This is also a spiritual homecoming. The people will be given a fresh chance to

turn their hearts toward God. In other words, the people are given a chance to repent. That is what repentance is all about—it is about turning away from the path we've been on and turning toward God.

Isaiah predicts that this homecoming will be filled with revelry and rejoicing. The people's repentance will be an occasion for joy and festivities. And all creation will participate in this celebration. Isaiah tells us that even the trees of the field will clap their hands and that the mountains and hills will burst into song. All creation will utter "Wow" at the people's choice to return to God and at the new thing God is doing in their lives.

What would cause the mountains and the trees to exclaim "Wow" about some wondrous change in your life? Or about a marvelous turning of events in our world? Imagine the "Wow" that would be celebrated in heaven if the world's nations suddenly got very serious about addressing climate change. Imagine how the trees of the field and the polar bears of the arctic might clap their hands with joy at our repentance. It would be tremendous, fantastic, wondrous good news. And that is because genuine repentance *is* good news.

We hear about repentance in Luke's gospel text as well, but on the surface it doesn't appear at first to be good news. And that is because before we hear the good news, we are told some bad news. The bad news is that we are all going to die. All of us. Some will die tragically in tsunamis and earthquakes and car accidents. Some will die of cancer. Some will die peacefully in their beds at a ripe old age. But all of us will die.

Some, like the people Jesus speaks about in our passage from Luke, died tragically at the hands of a wicked ruler, Pilate—the very ruler who will later kill Jesus. And some other people Jesus speaks about died tragically in a freak accident when a tower fell on them. Jesus first speaks to the issue that was on everybody's mind regarding these two tragedies: did the people

who died deserve to die because they did something wrong? Had they displeased God in some way. That was the prevailing wisdom of the day—that tragedy was a direct punishment for a person’s sins.

Jesus redirects the conversation away from this belief that the victims were somehow to blame for their misfortunes. And instead, Jesus reasserts that all of us will die. The question is, how have you lived? Jesus calls us to turn our attention away from blaming others for their sufferings and instead to focus our attention on our own life. Examine your own life. And live as though you could lose your life at any moment—which you could.

We’ve all heard those stories of people who came close to dying and for whom this brush with death was a life-transforming experience. Their close encounter with death left them appreciating life all the more. These people examined their lives and looked into the future of who they would like to be, and they said “Wow!” Life could be so much more! Life could be so much more than trying to acquire money or status, so much more than harboring grudges and anger, so much more than living in shame, so much more! And some of these people who’ve come close to death decide to change their lives. They repent. They want to live into that Wow!

After inviting us to consider our own deaths, Jesus then moves on to the good news. The good news is found in Jesus’ short parable about the fig tree that wasn’t growing any figs. The frustrated vineyard owner wanted to cut down the barren tree. But the gardener was merciful. Give it another year, he says. Let me put manure on it. Let’s see if it may bear fruit. The good news is that Jesus, the gardener, wants us to live, to live abundantly and fruitfully. Jesus believes that our lives can bear good fruit. Jesus has the hope and Jesus has the desire that we can know the Wow that comes from turning toward God. Imagine what we can produce! Imagine what love your life can produce! Imagine how nurturing forgiveness might bring forth something

marvelous! Imagine how the healing that can spring forth from your compassion! Imagine how your generosity might bring about great blessings for someone else! Imagine how your service can make a difference! Imagine all the things you could do if you were not so encumbered by material possessions! Imagine what your life can look like!

The prophet Isaiah imagines the life God offers us like a rich and wondrous banquet. There at the buffet table is laid out the finest foods and drinks imaginable. God wishes for us to enjoy the gift of life. But instead, too often we settle for junk food. We live junk food lives. We harbor junk food resentments. We seek junk food pleasures. We fill our homes with junk food goods. But there is an alternative. Jesus came to show us that alternative. He takes us by the hand and leads us to the buffet table and shows us the amazing spread God has laid out for us. No matter how badly we have messed up in our lives, no matter how injured or wounded we are, no matter how broken we may feel, God spreads the table of love before us and offers us an abundant life rooted in God's love and mercy.

Jesus hopes, of course, that when we see it, when we take in the feast of abundance God has laid before us, we will say "Wow!" We will marvel at the life that could be ours if we only said yes to God. Our Wow is the expression of wonder and marvel and joy at what God is offering us and what God can produce from us and with us. Our Wow is rooted in the awareness of good news, great news, the joyful news of repentance.