Repentance as Invitation

There’s a scene in the 1965 film Sound of Music that came up in my mind multiple times this week as I studied our readings. Many of you have probably seen the film, or at least parts of it. About halfway through the movie, the main character Maria, played by Julie Andrews, Is embracing with Captain von Trapp in a darkened gazebo. All we can see are their silhouetted figures. It’s the first time they’ve expressed their love for each other, And it’s pretty steamy, for 1965.

Then Maria sings:
“Perhaps I had a wicked childhood
Perhaps I had a miserable youth
But somewhere in my wicked, miserable past
There must have been a moment of truth.”

Then the two sing together:
“Nothing comes from nothing,
Nothing ever could.
So somewhere in my youth or childhood
I must have done something good
For here you are standing there, loving me
Whether or not you should.”

The scene is less than 2 minutes, but it packs a big punch. The entire plot of the movie swings on it. And even more than plot movement, the song sets forth an ideology to which so many of us succumb:
“I must’ve done something to deserve this.”

This is a nearly universal belief that we all quietly hold: Our moral actions somehow determine what happens to us. If we’re good, then good things will happen. If we’re bad, then we’ll eventually get what’s coming to us.

This is the underlying belief at the heart of our Gospel today.

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Jesus is speaking with a crowd when the members of the crowd approach him with, as one writer put it, “headlines of horror and tragedy.”

People have heard of gruesome stories of Pilate going on a killing spree, and mingling the blood of his victims with the blood of the animal sacrifices people made.

Not only was this an act of violence against people, But also, against an entire religious way of being.

Then there’s the story of the collapse of the tower of Siloam.
This technological failure resulted in the deaths of 18 innocent people, Who happened to be in the wrong place in Jerusalem at the wrong time.

Senseless crimes.
Innocent victims.
Violated religions.
Mass casualties.

“They must’ve done something bad,” the people say to Jesus.
They must’ve done something to deserve this fate.

At the heart of it, the question from the crowd that day is the same as ours today:
Why do evil things happen in our world?
Why do terrible things happen to wonderful people?
Did we do something to deserve this?

Nearly every week we stand with global reminders of this question.
Of people who go to worship and never get to return to their families.

Of cyclones that literally span multiple countries in their destruction.

Of planes that go down, killing all the passengers abroad.

“Why?” We’re left wondering.

“Why?”

I long for a pastoral response from our great shepherd and leader, Jesus.
Just like the people 2,000 years ago, we want a word of explanation.
Something to help us understand and feel like it’s going to be okay for us.
I wish I could twist Jesus’ words into platitudes of comfort,
But it’s just not there.

“Do you think those people suffered and died because they were worse sinners than anyone else?” Jesus asks, twice.

And twice he answers his own question:

“No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you’ll all die as they did.”

“Are you sure, Jesus?” I want to say.

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2 Debie Thomas - https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay
5 https://qz.com/1578227/everything-we-know-about-the-boeing-737-max-8-crashes/
“Are you sure you don’t want to try answering the question again?”

He answers one deep, basic question, which is that we don’t suffer because of our sins. Death is not a punishment for what we did or didn’t do. But he doesn’t answer the deeper why questions we have. Instead, he turns it back on us: “Unless you repent, you’ll die just like they did.”

Doesn’t it feel like the wrong time to introduce the idea of repentance? We’re mired in headlines of horror and tragedy, weeping and in shock in the wake of atrocity after atrocity.

Isn’t this the time for comfort? For… dare I say it, “thoughts and prayers”? We’re asking about the origins and causes of evil, and Jesus instead pushes the topic of repentance in front of us.

I spent a good bit of time frustrated with Jesus this week. Frustrated that he didn’t answer our deepest questions of evil. Frustrated that this world has to contain such unrelenting hate and sorrow. Then I was walking down the street and literally thought, “Wait, what if Jesus was right?” (Crazy, I know, to consider that our Lord and Savior might’ve known what he was doing!). What if the most pastoral, the most loving response to us, is to tell us to repent?

It all has to do with how we think about repentance. Which isn’t something we have much practice thinking about. At its most basic, repentance means returning to God. There’s no punishment inherent in the meaning of the word. Repentance comes from the Greek metanoia, which means turning. It means changing one’s mind, regretting the ways things are or have been – it means admitting the ways we’ve been complicit in creating cultures where mass shootings regularly happen and hate can spread. It means saying we’re sorry. Repentance means admitting that we don’t have the answers, and admitting we don’t know how to control much of anything.

Perhaps there’s no better response in the face of tragedy then to hear Jesus’ invitation cutting through the fog of our grief: “Come, I’m over here. Turn your yourself around. Draw nearer to me. Repent – not because I don’t think you’re good, but because I promise you’re better off with me.”

Jesus doesn’t offer us platitudes of comfort, because he has something much better to offer us. He offers us repentance – the chance to try again, to keep going.
The chance to be forgiven and healed,
To go forward and be led by God again.
Jesus offers us this repentance, not as a punishment, but as an invitation.

Jesus ends this encounter with a story of a fig tree.
It’s an illustration of what has come before:
A story of the need for change, and the equal need for patience with each other and ourselves as we make that change.
Jesus is the patient gardener in the story,
Who tells us we have more time to try again and turn back to God.
In the meantime, Jesus is the caring gardener who’ll till the earth around us and keep us healthy.

Jesus knows we can’t change overnight.
He knows the road to repentance is long,
and full of muck and manure and hard work.6
Jesus knows we’ll meet unspeakable tragedy on our way,
But he invites us onto the path with him.
He invites us to stand nearer to his strength --- a strength that has conquered death.

Jesus, the patient gardener, is waiting for our answer.
Will we turn ourselves – in our mind and body and heart – towards the light that the darkness cannot put out?
Will we repent?
Jesus is going on the journey regardless,
now he’s just waiting to see if we’re willing to turn and go with him,
If we’re willing to bear fruit.

Amen.

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6 Credit to Debbie Thomas for framing the fig tree story with “muck and manure” for me - https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay