

The Third Sunday in Lent - Year C
March 7, 2010
The Reverend Robert P. Travis

“Repentance of Things Left Undone”

Text: Exodus 3:1-15, Psalm 63:1-8, 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, Luke 13:1-9

In the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ, who intercedes for us before the Father.

In a recent issue of *The Living Church* there were two articles on the devastating earthquake in Haiti. I found it ironic, that those appeared in the special issue, on “Church Architecture and Restoration.”

I was reading this issue a bit late, as it came out on February 7th, but as you may know, during that week Jackie and I were too busy growing our family, to read a magazine or really keep up with any news. It may seem strange that I’m referring to Haiti in the wake of the earthquake in Chile, As it seems our news world has forgotten about the Island nation, but as I’ll mention later, the Haitians are actually closer to us, in the Episcopal Church, and certainly their situation continues to be dire.

Also I believe it was providential that I read these articles, as I was preparing to preach on this Gospel today. Because the incidents and accidents, and Jesus’ response to those current events of his time, practically scream out at me, in their similarity to what is going on in Haiti. You may have heard, that Pat Robertson and others claimed in the aftermath of that tragic disaster, that the Haitians brought the devastation on themselves, because of their sin. In a sense he was saying exactly what those people who were talking to Jesus, in our Gospel today were saying about the massacre of the Galileans, in the temple, or those who died, in the accident when the tower of Siloam fell on them. Both of those tragedies were recent, and fresh in the minds of the Israelites. It was also common wisdom at the time, that great suffering was the direct result of sin. Those people were asking Jesus, if it was because the slain were greater sinners, that they experienced such suffering. But Jesus went against the common thinking, and said, “No, I tell you.” It was not because they were worse sinners.

It probably wouldn't be surprising to you, that I believe Jesus would say the same thing to

Pat Robertson, and all of those who agreed with him. No, I tell you! The earthquake in Haiti had nothing to do with them being greater sinners than we are. But the challenging part of the Gospel, is the sentence which follows. Jesus, continues while on the one hand saying no, that's not why it happened, He immediately says, "but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." He did not mince words, about our shared need for repentance. And that challenge should be as difficult for us, in the Episcopal Church in light of what happened in Haiti as calls for repentance often are. This reminds me of the our confession prayer we say each Sunday. We say we repent of, "things done and left undone."

Over the past few decades, including the 1990's which was declared the "decade of Evangelism," We have failed to lead others to Jesus, to spread the good news of the Kingdom, Episcopal-style to those around us. And it shows in our continuing decline. In most of the Episcopal Church, certainly where I grew up in the Northeast, where so many churches stand empty, we have left undone the primary thing Jesus asked us to do.

Certainly the tragedy in Haiti was severe, and it troubled the minds of many in this country. But for us, as Episcopalians, it is not just a tragedy that happened in another country, even a neighboring country. The devastation was within our own family. Did you know that The Episcopal Church of Haiti, is a constituent diocese of our Episcopal Church? They have the same relationship to the Episcopal Church, as does the Diocese of East Tennessee. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ, in the closest possible sense. Not only that, but in terms of numbers of members, the diocese of Haiti is the single largest diocese in the Episcopal Church.

This I learned from that Living Church article, by the Bishop-elect of Connecticut, Ian T. Douglas, as he put it, "the death and destruction in Haiti is not some distant reality we see on TV so much as the death and destruction of ourselves." To give you some idea, of how the Episcopal Church in Haiti fared in that disaster, it is as if "their whole infrastructure is destroyed and gone." "The cathedral, with its incredible frescoes by the greatest of Haitian painters, a national treasure – gone, the diocesan offices – gone, the Episcopal High School, Holy Trinity Primary School, the Episcopal College, St. Margaret's Convent – all gone. The National Museum of Art, run by the Episcopal Church, gone. Nothing is left." Is this because they were greater sinners, than we in the rest of the Episcopal Church, Jesus would say: "No, I tell you; but unless you repent. . ."

And what do we have to repent of? Well of course we all have our individual sins, but repentance of those is easy to deal with. And if you are struggling with those this lent, I urge you to make an appointment with one of our clergy for a private service of Reconciliation.

But institutional sin is much harder. Turning the page, in that same issue, I found an article by Ephraim Radner, another Episcopal priest, who dared to venture a proposal, that even he acknowledged would be unrealistic in the face of what is going on in our church. But oftentimes true repentance, the kind that transforms us and bears fruit, seems unrealistic in the midst of our sin. Fr. Radner challenges the church to cease its litigation over property issues, and use the budgeted funds from that to help rebuild the church in Haiti.

It really bothers me, that we sue each other over property, that we can't fill. We have church buildings that are prime real estate, but stand mostly empty, because of our past unwillingness to step out of our comfort zones, and share our faith, unabashedly, with people who long to know Jesus - people who need his forgiveness and desire to experience abundant life in Him.

While in Haiti, one of the dioceses that fills its churches, those very places of worship have been destroyed. Did you know, that in the 1960's and 70's because of our failure to engage in real youth ministry in most places, we lost 80% of the young people who had been raised in the Episcopal Church? And in the 1980's and 90's, only 10% of them came back.

So it's not surprising that today, more than 50% of our members are not cradle-Episcopalians, but come from other denominations. The good news is, that people come to us from other denominations - shows that there is still great value in the Episcopal branch of the Body of Christ.

Of course we don't see most of this here as we worship at Ascension, because we have been blessed, with renewal and growth, and we by all accounts are doing well, and focussing on spreading the Gospel in our community, and we are about to ramp up our youth ministry, and hopefully encourage the faith of our youth, more than ever before. But we shouldn't shut our eyes to what is going on outside our church.

Just a few years ago, when I was beginning my ministry as a youth minister in the Diocese of Long Island, one of the wealthiest parts of our country, an area of over two million residents, with some 80,000 college students who claimed Episcopal backgrounds, there were nearly 50 of 150 parishes, that couldn't call one full-time priest, couldn't get more than 50 people in worship on Sunday. Though they each had space for hundreds. And rather than engage in radical evangelism, the diocese sold off church property left and right.

And now our brothers and sisters in Haiti, have lost everything that they had built, to be an Episcopal Church like those in America. Doesn't that just scream at your heart for repentance? It does to mine. In the parable of the fig tree, the owner of the garden is disap-

pointed when the tree doesn't bear fruit for three years, I read that was about the length of time in which a fig tree should begin bearing fruit. So he asks the gardener to cut it down. The gardener intercedes for the tree, pledging to care with extra devotion for the tree, if the owner will just give it one more year to bear fruit.

I don't think the Church of the Ascension can do much to sway the decision makers in the greater Episcopal Church, and other dioceses, but I do know that it is time for revival in the Episcopal Church, and Ascension is uniquely poised to be at the forefront of that revival. We may not be able to change what is going on in other places, with our complaints or suggestions, but if we bear the fruit of repentance by engaging in the evangelism the Episcopal Church so desperately needs, maybe the light we shine, can be a beacon in the dark places of the Episcopal Church.

Maybe the Episcopal Church won't listen to Dr. Radner's challenge and abandon the unbiblical lawsuits over our empty, but expensive property, and devote that money towards rebuilding Haiti. But maybe they would listen to us and begin to fill their churches because we show them what is possible with God reviving our church, because we bear fruit like no other Branch of the Episcopal Tree, because we become an example of successful renewal.

This Gospel message this morning is a tough one, it really is good news, "but only for those who leave the way that leads to destruction and come to true repentance." That's the challenge that Jesus gives his followers, "No, I tell you," these others were not greater sinners than anyone else, because of the destruction they experienced, "but unless you repent you will all perish just as they did." The Episcopal Church in Haiti, was not deeper in sin than we all are, and Haiti wasn't punished as some other Christians have claimed, but like those tragedies Jesus was talking about, their destruction can serve as a warning to us.

We can repent of the institutional sin, the things left undone, and help rebuild the Episcopal Church here, and with our brothers and sisters in Haiti. If we in the Episcopal Church are the fig tree, in God's garden, we certainly haven't been bearing fruit in these past few decades. In fact, in many areas we have been withering. It's a good thing we have, Jesus as the gardener, interceding for us, giving us another chance, caring for us with extra devotion, to see if we will bear fruit, before we are cut down.

Amen.