

Repent or perish: Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

by [Katherine A. Evensen](#) in the [February 23, 2010](#) issue

Repent or perish. I've worked my entire career to avoid using this phrase from Luke 13:5. I've been afraid that if the Christian message is reduced to these three words, people will hear in them only an angry God, a God who uses any excuse to punish us. But sometimes, I admit, I'm just trying to soften "repent or perish" so I can present a God with whom everyone is comfortable—a God who has better manners, a God I'm not embarrassed to take out into public.

I try to put the scriptural phrase from Luke 13 in context. I remind listeners of the context of the verse, which describes the recent deaths of 18 Galileans and the question subsequently asked by Jesus' followers, "Were they worse sinners than other Galileans?" Jesus tells them that these people were no more sinful than all of the rest of us: that his point is that the need to repent extends to all of God's children.

Or I point to the parable that follows, in which the Gardener Christ pleads with God to not give up on God's people. This is evidence, I remind my listeners, of God's extraordinary grace in waiting for our repentance.

I've learned by now, however, that despite my best efforts, I can't tame Jesus or soften the power of the words he speaks. Here he is in Luke 13, moving toward Jerusalem and railing against this and that and then telling an odd story about a fig tree. No matter how you turn the prism of this text, Jesus appears moody, demanding and on a tangent.

It would be easier if we had a Gospel without difficult words, without Jesus' diatribes on suffering and death, and did away with Lent. It would be easier on everyone if we popped right into Easter.

But we can't. We can't pick and choose biblical verses based on how we want to present God to the world or worry that Jesus might be offensive to people. Ultimately it is not we who interpret the text with its truth claims; it's the text that interprets us.

How do those difficult words “repent or perish” interpret us and our ideas about who we are as Christians and what it means to be a Christian in this world? “Repent or perish” is not just a rule set aside for those Galileans who have broken cleanliness laws; it is for all Galileans—even those who get the rules right every time. These words are not about a onetime repentance or a onetime perishing. It is ongoing: we continue to repent *and* we continue to die.

As followers of the cross, should this come as any surprise to us? Are we not repeatedly called to give up our hubris, our illusion that we’re in control? Are we not constantly beckoned into confession, to turn, to repent so that we become utterly dependent on the promises of God? When Christ offers us these hard words about repentance and death, he also becomes those very things on the cross. God takes on our limits and all the things that dog us—all the sin, death, rivalries, violence, prejudice, not to mention our bloated or enervated sense of self. God invites us to the other side of “repent or perish,” which is “forgiveness and life.”

Because of Christ, we find that in letting go we are taken into this larger story of freedom. With Christ, there is a new game in town and the old rules do not apply. With Christ we are lifted and made new.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord” (Isa. 55:8). Strangely enough, this is good news, for out of despair and sorrow, out of our inability to do the good we will ourselves to do, come redemption and hope and mercy. Repent or perish. These words are hard and true. We cannot dismiss or alleviate their difficulty in any way, but they are only half the story. The other half, the grace that is given in response, does not depend on us, but on this One who will not allow us to be separated from God’s love. These words we would prefer not to hear or would rather dismiss are spoken by One who ultimately will bear them for us. We repent, we die, and in all things we are given life.

Christ comes to us and we need him near. Now forgiven and soon to be raised, we are grateful for this love, for each song, each light, each other. Over time we find we are drawn more deeply into the world, but now we are opened and renewed and become imaginative, mad architects to God’s mercy. We tell the story of sin and death, repentance and resurrection in all its fullness. We lean into the hope that one day all will be lifted in a wild love.