

Sermon: A Non-Transactional God**Scripture: Isaiah 55: 1-13; Luke 13:1-9****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: March 19, 2022**

We call Lent the penitential season coming from the same word that penance, repentance, penitentiary derives from, a latin verb *paenitere* which means to be sorry. It's an important word as it's one of the first that Jesus speaks in the Gospels. For those of us who come from conservative Christian churches, the word comes with quite a bit of freight – “we must repent for our sinfulness or face the wrath of God – repent you sinners!”

But the word in the Greek text that is translated through Latin to English as “repent” is actually *metanoia*. And the original Greek word had a much grander meaning - “meta” meaning larger or transcendent and “noia” referring to knowledge. So it would be translated better as changing one's mind or a modifying of one's outlook, or better yet transforming of life. Jesus says as he first comes on the scene in the Gospel of Mark “The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the Good News!” So change the way you are understanding the world, how you believe things are, transform your mind and heart for the Kingdom of God is at hand! That's pretty different from “repent you sinners”, isn't it? It changes to some extent what we understand Jesus was going for.

Jesus proceeds from that point to heal people dismissed as hopelessly sick, to teach radical things, to confound the authorities, to challenge narrow beliefs and hypocritical practices. He bypasses the first and tends to the last, he overlooks the found and searches for the lost, and he does so much that

overturns conventional wisdom and understanding even and especially up to the point where he goes and dies himself to save everyone else. Talk about metanoia, mind change. Everything he does seems a challenge to the frame of reference, world view, assumptions of everyone around him and as it was then, I imagine it would be the same if he were here today. We would likely be just as flummoxed and baffled and challenged by him as they were by him then.

It's kind of discouraging if you think about it that for 2000 years since Jesus walked the earth we haven't come very far in understanding him any better? All these years still hasn't produced a world of people who are walking around enlightened, mind and heart changed and life transformed, finally living the way Jesus came to invite us to live.

Consider the passage from Luke that Judy read. Back then when Jesus lived there were tragedies and awful things that happened, both accidents and acts of violence that people were horrified by and were struggling with together... Just as we are asking one another what is happening and how can Russia possibly be doing this to Ukraine? The Jewish people at the time of this scripture were baffled by the evil of Pilate who had his soldiers slaughter worshippers offering sacrifices to God. The temple was usually off-limits to Roman soldiers and there was a relative truce especially when it came to Jewish religious practice and the occupying force of Rome. But apparently Pilate did not respect this truce and slaughtered innocents who were practicing their religion.

And so you can imagine how it would have been the topic of the day and people who were trying to understand why such horrible things could be allowed to happen to good people and so some were saying "well, they must not be favored by God, they must have been sinners if something so terrible could

happen to them in the midst of their sacrificing to God.” And they approached Jesus to see what he thought. But as Isaiah says in the passage Katherine read for us – “God’s thoughts are not our thoughts nor are God’s ways our ways” and Jesus made it clear that he thought they were very wrong. You think they were slaughtered because they were bad people, sinners, absolutely not! Then he takes another recent tragedy and says – you think the people who died in the collapse of that tower were also worse sinners? And he says no that’s absolutely not how it works. God does not punish the wicked and reward the good. God is not a transactional God like that. And then he says something that on the surface seems contradictory, he says “But if you do not repent you will die in the same way.” It sounds like he is threatening them – if you don’t repent then God will strike you down too. But he just said that’s not how it works. So we can better hear that as Jesus saying if you do not repent - see in a transformed way, bigger and deeper than how you are seeing now - then you too will die believing that God is a transactional God, full of wrath who punishes the wicked and rewards the good. And that is not the truth.

This is something that is tough for us to get our heads around, I find, and keep our heads around - that in this world of transactions, God is not a transactional God, in this world of reward and punishment, God does not operate as a rewarder and punisher, in this world of tit-for-tat, eye-for-eye, God’s grace overrides it all, for we do not earn God’s grace and love and favor, it is only given.

This scriptures calls us to a metanoia moment of needing to think in a larger transformed way from how we usually think... so let me say it again - You do not need to earn God’s love. And, the good things in your life are not given to you by God because you deserve them. Nor are the bad things that happen in your life,

happening because God is punishing you. God is not a transactional God like that and how do we know, because the Bible tells us so. It's what they said, Jesus said.

Since Maggie was talking to the kids about prayer, it's worth noting how this affects our prayer as well. It's so easy to fall into the belief that if we pray right or pray well that God will answer our prayers, but because God is not a transactional God, prayer is not about getting God to do what we want God to do when we want it. Nor does God reward us with answered prayer and punish us with unanswered prayer. Jesus flat out rejects that notion a number of times in his teaching. But it's easy to think that way because many of our interactions in our consumer culture do in fact work that way. But not with God. When our loved one isn't healed despite our prayers and when our child continues down a terrible path despite our pleading with God to help them and when we don't get the job we've been praying for or even have a sense of God's presence in our suffering or our loneliness, when we pray and the war just continues, it is not because we or they have deserved or not deserved it. Whether someone is deserving or not is how we think but as Isaiah says our thoughts are not God's thoughts, neither are our ways God's ways necessarily.

God's grace and mercy is given, our holy word says, it's given to all in equal measure like it or not. And I have to say we like it a lot when that claim is offered to us and our favorite people but don't we like it a lot less when it's offered to the people we like a lot less? "Surely," we want to say, "God will punish Putin for what he's doing to Ukraine? Surely!" But Jesus' words resound and we recognize our being caught in the worldly wisdom not the wisdom of God and we hear again "God does not punish the bad and reward the good. Life is granted to the good and the bad alike." Remember when Jesus says love your enemies that you may

truly be sons and daughters of God in heaven, God, the one who causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the good and the bad alike.” (Matthew 5:4). There are clear consequences, causes and effects, that play out in this world based upon what we do or don't do, but that's a different thing than saying God will punish the wicked for their violence and reward the good for their faithfulness. After all Jesus was faithful and look what happened to him. When we are talking about the level of God, when we are trying to see things from the perspective of heaven we've must seek metanoia, that larger mind, that broader heart, blow open a more spacious spirit in us and try and live our lives out of that.

So if God is not a transactional God then one might wonder what the point of prayer is, praying for things we want or praying against the bad things? Well, I'm saying that God is not transactional “ok, you do this for me, I'll do this for you” or “you act like that I'll act like this” but that doesn't mean God isn't relational and that our prayers don't mean anything or aren't effective. IT's all so full of mystery, but I'm putting my money on banking that prayer has its effect and matters. Maybe it's something about the God in us that meets the God in the need of the other and that intention causes some kind of effect and who knows what kind, but supplication and intercession and meditation have their effects on the Spirit level of life, I have little doubt.

But let me also say this - to say God is not a transactional God is to say something similar to saying marriage is not a transactional relationship. I hope your marriage is not a transactional thing nor your spouse a transactional partner. I hope your marriage is a love thing and your partner operates more out of love than transactions. And that's the heart of what I think Jesus is saying about our relationship with God. It's a relationship of love much more than transaction.

And in a relationship of love we don't judge it based upon whether we are getting what we ask for and we don't reward the other for being good and punish the other for being bad. Sometimes when the other is bad we forgive them completely and other times listen to them and try and understand them and sympathize with their issues and sometimes we sacrifice our own good for the sake of their good and whether they are being good or not is beside the point. And that finally is what Jesus did, embodied God's love on the cross and as a result a metanoia occurred in the communities around him – their narrow conventional view of life and death was shattered that one early morning in the Garden and all who witnessed it suddenly saw things anew and renewed and forever changed, transformed by the amazing unconditional unwarranted grace of God. Amen!