

REPENT OR PERISH
Randall Tremba
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Third Sunday in Lent
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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THIRST

Mary Oliver

Another morning and I wake with thirst
for the goodness I do not have. I walk
out to the pond and all the way God has
given us such beautiful lessons. Oh Lord,
I was never a quick scholar but sulked
and hunched over my books past the hour
and the bell; grant me, in your mercy,
a little more time. Love for the earth
and love for you are having such a long
conversation in my heart. Who knows what
will finally happen or where I will be sent,
yet already I have given a great many things
away, expecting to be told to pack nothing,
except the prayers which, with this thirst,
I am slowly learning.

O Love, You are my Beloved. I long for You. My soul thirsts for You. All that is within me thirsts, as in a dry and barren land with no water. (Psalm 63)

Listen up everyone who is thirsty. Come to the waters. You that have no money, come, buy and eat! Why do you spend your money for what is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen up! Eat what is good, and delight yourselves in wholesome food. (Isaiah 55:1-9)

Which is to say, when it comes to spending money and eating food we have choices. Some promote life; some destroy life. We all make bad choices. But we are not doomed. We can change. We can repent or perish.

Those words—*repent or perish*—are often bellowed out as a threat. But there's another way of hearing them—not as a threat but as an invitation, an invitation to wake up and return to the path that leads to life. It's not a threat about perishing in hell. It's an invitation to escape a hellish, rotten life now.

"Repent" literally means turn around, or return, or be transformed the way a caterpillar transforms into a butterfly. We can evolve. We can become less fearful, less foolish, less selfish and more wise and compassionate.

But it's not inevitable. Choices must be made.

And that brings us to the gospel lesson for today.

Jesus was once asked why certain people had been slaughtered by Pilate and why, another time, certain people had been killed when a certain tower collapsed. *Were those victims punished for being sinners?*

And Jesus said: Do you think they were worse than anyone else? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish."

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit and found none. So he said to the gardener, "For three years I have looked for figs and still find none.

Cut it down!"

But the gardener replied, 'Sir, please let it alone for one more year until I dig around it and add some manure. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'" (Luke 13:1-9)

That gardener knew something about fig trees the owner did not. It takes at least four years for a tree to produce figs. That tree would bear figs. It takes time and effort to cultivate a fruitful tree and it takes time and effort to cultivate a fruitful life.

This past Tuesday I gave a talk to 30 scientists who work at the Appalachian Fruit Research Station. They work to help fruit trees flourish. I was invited by our own Michael Wisniewski, who is chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Committee. I was asked to speak on the subject: "Embracing Diversity."

I know scientists suspect religious leaders of opposing science, especially evolution. So I immediately disarmed them by telling them how much I love evolution and Charles Darwin himself.

He's a saint in my book, I told them. He helped me see the world as stupendously diverse, yet one. I told them that the children of our church had sung "Happy Birthday" to Darwin on the occasion of this 200th birthday.

I told them I believe in creation, but I am not a creationist. In fact, I resent fundamentalists and certain evangelicals who try to force creationism into school textbooks as an alternative to evolution.

I told them I take the Bible too seriously to take it literally. For example, the "seven days of creation" in Genesis 1 can be seen as a mythic poem proclaiming the natural world as good. The "seven days" are a poetic device and the refrain through those seven days is: *Behold, it is good.* I believe in original blessing not original sin, I told them.

And yet the folktales in Genesis 2-11 suggest all is not well with the human animal. You can see the Great Ancestor's diagnosis of the human condition in a series of folktales from the forbidden fruit, to Cain and Abel, to the tower of Babel.

We have an insatiable thirst for knowledge that not even the gods can stop. We are violent and revengeful. We kill our own brothers and sisters. We are tribalistic and xenophobic, always fearful of the other.

Those folktales, I told them, are a prelude to the beginnings of history, a story of a promise somehow implanted in the human hearts. We are still evolving. We can overcome tribalism, embrace and celebrate diversity, and cultivate a world of peace and universal kinship. But it's not inevitable. Choices must be made.

We are a young species. We have much to learn. Like fruit trees, we need time.

I told those fruit scientists that before I was called to serve the Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church 40 years ago, I had been a pruner of apple trees. Forty-one years ago this month I was working in the Walnut Hill Orchards outside of Harpers Ferry.

One morning I was told to get on the tractor, hook it to a tanker full of a chemical and spray all the trees. That night I was sick as a dog. For two days I thought I was going to die. When I told the foreman, he said I was lucky to be alive. I should have worn a mask. I was also told that chemical was toxic and had been banned by the USDA.

So I asked those scientists working for the USDA what that chemical might have been. And one of them said: *could have been one of many.*

And therein lies another parable.

We do many hurtful things to the earth and ourselves. We poison the waters, the soil, the air and our own lives in more ways than one. We spend our money and labor on things that aren't good.

But we can repent.

Yes, we often look at the world and ourselves and become discouraged and impatient. We sometimes hate ourselves. *I'm not good enough*, we say. *My life is a failure. It's unfruitful and doesn't amount to a thing.* Or we sometimes think, *humanity itself is doomed.*

But the Beloved Gardener knows us better than we know ourselves. The Beloved stands beside us, saying time and time again: *Be kind to yourself. You just need a little more time. Be patient. You're still quite young. There's still a lot to learn. You have time.*