Opinion
Spirituality



People affected by Cyclone Idai walk with their belongings in Beira, Mozambique, March 20, 2019. Hundreds were feared dead in Mozambique four days after a cyclone slammed into the country, submerging entire villages and leaving bodies floating in the floodwaters, the nation's president said. (CNS photo/Josh Estey, Care International via Reuters)

by James Hug

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Lent is an important opportunity to rethink and reevaluate the patterns and flow of our lives. That is what "repentance" means: think about it again and see if you are present to God and letting God be present to you in the ways you want, the ways that make your life fruitful and blessed.

In that context, the Gospel for the third Sunday of Lent (Luke 13:1-9) raises important considerations. If the encounter of Jesus with the local people described there were to take place here among us today, I can imagine Jesus asking something like this:

Do you think that because certain Iowans and Nebraskans suffered so terribly in the record-breaking flooding this spring that they were greater sinners than all other Americans?

Or the thousand people who were killed when Cyclone Idai struck Southern Africa — do you think they were guiltier than anyone else who lived in Southern Africa?

I think that most of us would answer spontaneously as Jesus did: "By no means!" There is no evidence or reason to believe that they are. And moreover, the God we know in our tradition, God who is present to us and to whom we are present in our experience, is not judgmental and punitive like that. The God of our tradition is the God who heard the cries of the slaves in Egypt and called Moses to liberate them. The God that we have come to know through Jesus is compassionate, hears the cries of the poor and suffering to this day, still works to liberate those in need and to create communities of love and service for all.

The God to whom we are present and who is present to us is not One who is judging us all in real time and sending targeted sufferings to punish evildoers. Nor is our escape from those sufferings a sign of our innocence!

Then what is the significance of the next part of Jesus's response: "But I tell you that if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!" Even though God is compassionate and working to liberate those in need, this is a very serious warning. And actually the contemporary examples I just used can help us to understand this warning more readily than the examples of Pilate's cruel oppression or the collapsing tower at Siloam. Unless we rethink and reevaluate the ways we are present to and live upon this planet, climate change will continue to increase the severity of storms

and the immensity of natural catastrophes. The warnings of the scientific community are growing more and more dire practically by the day: unless we repent, we may indeed perish as the people in the Midwest of the U.S., Southern Africa and so many other places around the planet have.

And it isn't just our ecological patterns that threaten our survival. The massive and growing economic inequality threatens major social unrest. People will only watch their children starve for so long while their neighbors flaunt obscene wealth and luxury. The wealth/poverty patterns on the planet today are some of the worst in history and are growing worse. Not only is this dynamic a sin crying out to God, it is socially unsustainable.

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Combined with the changing climate undermining the ability of people to feed and shelter themselves and their families, these patterns are driving migration and conflict. The mass movement of peoples, the emergence of conflicts, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, the patterns of discrimination and promotion of hatred and exclusion — all these are prominent in our time. Jesus' warning to the people of his time is a very serious divine warning to ours as well: "I tell you that if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did."

When we acknowledge that, as it was for Moses before the burning bush, the ground we stand on is holy, we must acknowledge that this warning is both serious and sacred.

The parable of the fig tree that Jesus tells carries an important message. God is looking for fruitfulness from us in responding to this world that is so in need of love, healing and renewal. In coming to us, does God find fruit? When we "repent" — rethink and reevaluate the ways we're present to God and each other and our world — do we find we are living in ways that are fruitful for Christ's mission in our world at this time?

The parable portrays a God Who can be patient. Is there cultivation and fertilization that we need to undertake? God is willing to be patient with us, but can't wait forever. The patterns of destruction at work in our world have their own momentum and thrive on our complacency. If we don't repent, perishing is a real possibility.

The question is serious and sacred for each of us. As we "repent," rethink, reevaluate, what cultivation and fertilization do we need to undertake to bring forth the fruit God needs and hopes from me, from you?

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