

Lent 3 – March 7, 2010

Numbers 16:23-40 **UNLESS YOU REPENT...**

Pastor Thomas Kneser

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

What's going on with our planet? Last weekend two more catastrophic earthquakes took place, one in Chile that has resulted in nearly 1000 deaths and half a million homeless. The other was just off the coast of Okinawa, although that one wasn't quite as devastating. Those follow on the heels of the horrifying quake that happened in Haiti in early January with at least 300,000 dead. Add to that the huge snowstorms in the eastern part of our county, the mudslides and torrential rain on West Coast. These natural disasters have caused billions of dollars of damage, and have brought great loss of life. A lot of people are shaking their heads and asking, WHY is all this happening? Then you throw in the violence in our world - murder here in Milwaukee, war and terrorism and evil around the world, major accidents that cause suffering, pain and death. And we are led to ask, WHY? Even Christians become victims of these natural disasters and of the evils of mankind. We are not exempt.

Today we have heard in our OT lesson an astounding judgment of God, one in a series of events that the apostle Paul was talking about in the NT lesson and which Jesus pinpoints in our gospel. Whenever we see or hear about or we ourselves are involved in these kinds of situations, we need to learn that lesson, which Jesus expressed this way:

UNLESS YOU REPENT, YOU TOO WILL ALL PERISH

Are all these events going on in our world lately, are they all directly related to some particular sin, either by individuals or by a nation? God just hasn't revealed that to us, and anyone who says that there is a direct correlation, is really just sticking their neck out. Only God knows whether that is the case or not. In the words before us today, we know that that was the case, because he has told us so here in his word.

The background for this judgment of God is unfortunately all related to the sins of the Children of Israel after they had been powerfully and miraculously set free by God from their slavery in Egypt. They were on their way to the land of Canaan, the land the Lord had promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But when they got to the border, they balked. They didn't trust God's promise that he would deliver the inhabitants into their hands. The fear in their hearts led them to rebel and so God sentenced them to 38 more years of wandering in the wilderness, letting that rebellious generation die off before he would again give them the opportunity to take possession of the land.

Sometime during that 38 years, the incident here took place. The trio of leaders was these men, Korah, Dathan and Abiram. In essence, their sin was that they challenged the authority God had given to Moses and Aaron to be the physical and spiritual leaders of the Israelites. Korah was one of the servants in the tabernacle and he wanted to take over Aaron's role as God's appointed high priest. Dathan and Abiram thought that Moses had been in charge long enough and that he wasn't doing a very good job. They gathered some 250 other prominent men of the nation to back them up, so this was a very serious challenge to the authority God had given to Moses and Aaron.

And that's what gets to the heart of their sin, the seriousness of it. It wasn't just a rebellion against the leadership of Moses and Aaron. It was a challenge to God himself. Moses stated that here when he said in v.30, **These men have treated the Lord with contempt.** They were

calling into question God's decisions and appointments. They were scorning his direction over them, thinking they knew better and that God had made some big mistakes. They simply didn't want God to be their leader anymore. They wanted to get themselves out from under His word and his discipline. They thought they could do better than God. That was their sin.

And isn't that really what every sin is? It's rebellion against God. In his word, God sets the standard for conduct by his creatures, and we human beings think it doesn't apply to us. We miss the mark over and over and over again. Paul wrote to the Romans that **the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.** There's the root cause of sin, the sinful nature with which every single one of us is born. Our natural spiritual condition is that we are hostile God. We don't want to take orders from him and his word. We think we know better, and that we will be just fine by ourselves without God sticking his nose into our business.

We see that so clearly in the philosophies and attitudes of the people around us and the world in which we live. Look at the moral standards of most people. There's the rationalizing of couples who think it's safer to try out marriage by living together beforehand, despite what God tells us in his word that the **marriage should be honored by all and the marriage bed kept pure. For God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.** That leads right into the outright rebellion against God's word by those who want to justify the homosexual and lesbian lifestyle. The Bible says, **Women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. The men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. They committed indecent acts with other men and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.** We could say the same things about those who advocate abortion on demand. These are all a direct assault on the standards God himself has set before us in his word. It is out and out treating his word with contempt, thinking that we human beings know better and we don't have to follow the direction God gives in his word.

That also carries over into the ideas people have about salvation, if they even care about the afterlife at all. Man-made religion will always focus on the solutions human beings come up with by themselves, putting a coating of good works and treating people nicely and saying that that's all that matters. So whether you follow the philosophies and teachings of Buddha or Mohammed or Jesus or whatever else is out there, well, they're all the same and will all accomplish the same thing. It's all up to you to make your own peace with God.

But that is simply an outright rebellion against what God clearly teaches in his word – that there is only one path to salvation and that is through faith in Jesus Christ. God is serious when it comes to sin, and the only solution is through the perfect life and the innocent suffering and death of Jesus. So, who's in control of your heart and your life? Is it our Lord God and the message of his word that Jesus is our only Savior, or are we rebelling against that and putting it out there that we can decide for ourselves and that we don't need God?

II.

If that's the course of action you are taking, whether you consciously say that or just display it by your continual living in a state of rebellion, then you'd better take note of how God deals with those who oppose him and his word. Look at the severe judgment that came upon Korah, Dathan and Abiram and the 250 who followed them.

Moses proposed a demonstration to show everyone who was right and who was wrong, who had the Lord's blessing and who didn't. The 250 prominent men took their censers (that's a little dish on which incense is burned) and brought them to the tabernacle where they burned

some of the holy incense on them. That was a duty that was restricted by God to the priests and members of the tribe of Levi who served in God's house.

For Korah, Dathan and Abiram, they and their families stood at the entrance to their tents and Moses laid it out for the people. **If these men die a natural death and experience only what usually happens to men, then the Lord has not sent me. But if the Lord brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the grave, then you will know that these men have treated the Lord with contempt.** And we heard what happened. They did not die natural deaths, but fell under a horrible judgment of the Lord which they had brought upon themselves by their sinful rebellion. The earth closed over them and they were gone from the community. And a great fear came over the people. And for the 250 prominent men, fire from the Lord's glory that was inhabiting the tabernacle came out and consumed them. God's judgment on their sin was swift and it was decisive. He just will not tolerate rebellion against him and his Word.

What effect should this incident have on us? God takes sin seriously and he will severely punish those who continue to live in it. It's that simple. Now that punishment will not normally take place in such a dramatic way as we see here, or as both Paul and Jesus talked about in our other Scripture readings. Paul made it clear: **These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us. So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!** Or Jesus' words, These people who died were not worse sinners than anyone else, but **unless you repent, you too will all perish.** And his lesson about the fig tree shows that God will cut us down and destroy us if we do not repent and produce the fruits of faith which he directs us to have from his word. Hell is very real, and unfortunately, many will end up there because of their continued, sinful rebellion against God and his Word.

III.

So Jesus calls on all of us to repent. That doesn't mean we will be free from the curse and effects of sin. We may still be targets for violence, or suffer in natural disasters or become victims of accidents. But God has laid out in his word a loving solution to deal with our sinfulness. It starts by taking his word seriously when it condemns us because of our sin. The first step in repentance is to acknowledge that we are sinners, that we have a sinful nature that controls us and that we have broken God's commands and that we do deserve his punishment. That's the purpose of God's law, to bring us to our knees in sorrow over our sins, not just because we may have gotten caught, but because every sin, whether in our thoughts, our words or in our actions, every one of them is an affront to our holy God. Every sin we commit is open rebellion against his authority and his love. Failure to acknowledge that will lead to sure and certain judgment in hell.

But the key to repentance is to look to Jesus and his cross for complete forgiveness. In Jesus we see the holy life that earned God's perfection which is applied to us in faith. In Jesus' death we see the punishment that should have been ours and but was transferred to God's holy son when our sins were laid on his shoulders. In that life and death of our Savior, forgiveness of sins has been earned for us, the complete price has been paid so that we can have salvation. As we put our faith and trust in Jesus' life and death and resurrection we are led by the Spirit to know that we are God's dearly loved children, that his intent is not to let us go our merry way to hell, but that he wants us to be with him for all eternity in heaven.

And that love will then motivate us to fight sin in our lives. We will produce fruits that flow from repentance, following up the confession of our lips with lives that are dedicated to fol-

lowing God and his word. The couples living together will stop doing so and be joined together in marriage. Those following immoral lifestyles will renounce them and look to the Spirit's power to live pure and holy lives. Whatever your sins may be, know that Jesus has forgiven them and that through the power of the word you can overcome them and live in repentance and faith.

This may have sounded like one of those proverbial "fire and brimstone" message, a strong preaching of the law. But all of us need that as a warning about the seriousness of sin, especially when so many in our world disregard it and the eternal consequences of an impenitent life. We see the warnings that God gives in the world around us – natural disasters, accidents and the like. But through Jesus and his word we can be prepared to meet death at any moment, as we live lives of repentance and faith. AMEN.