

Stanford Memorial Church  
March 11, 2007  
The Rev. Diana D. Akiyama

Isaiah 55: 1-9  
Luke 13: 1-9

### **“Gird Your Loins: The Problem with Running in Skirts”**

I am honored to be here in the pulpit at MemChu, and would like to thank Associate Dean Joanne Sanders and Acting Dean Patricia Karlin-Neumann for the invitation.

As you know, I am doing this same work at Occidental College. My office is in Occidental’s Herrick Interfaith Chapel---a very large modern structure that, like MemChu, can hardly be called a “chapel.” But there are no Sunday services at Herrick Chapel, so I don’t preach regularly.

This is not a confession; it’s a warning.

Beware of preachers invited in from the desert!

Today is the third day in Lent. By now, you should be settled into your Lenten disciplines. Perhaps you gave up habits you aren’t proud of, or are denying yourself indulgences to remind you of the Lenten focus on contrition and repentance. One of my colleagues is giving up chocolate for Lent. A group of our students is holding a week-long fast, next week, in solidarity with those suffering in Darfur and to highlight the season of Lent. Our Lenten disciplines are meant to remind us of what is needed to remain faithful to God. We are instructed to repent for those obstacles we have put in the way of our relationship with God and then resolve to remove them.

In today’s Gospel reading Jesus offers a view of repentance that first requires that we understand sin: suffering is not evidence of the wrath of God for one’s sins, neither is the victory or good fortune in one’s life a sign of God’s blessing.

It is an age-old human tendency to believe that God (or the gods) are causing the good or bad things that happen in our lives. These good or bad events must then be a judgment about us: good things in our lives mean that we are blessed; bad things happening in our lives mean that not only are we not blessed but we have sinned terribly. This is very bad theology but it has become quite popular of late.

I wish I had a nickel for every time I’ve heard someone say, “I am so blessed to have survived that accident,” or “We are so blessed to be traveling to Paris this summer,” or “I am blessed to be a student at this college.” It doesn’t take a deep reflection to realize how much they sound like the folks Jesus was admonishing in today’s passage.

Two weeks ago in Los Angeles, famous actors and actresses gathered for the Academy Awards. Some of the winners remarked that they were blessed as winners. I cringed when I heard this because it is disturbing to think about what they are implying to those who did not win.

Let me paraphrase Jesus: Do you think that because you are wealthy, educated, healthy that you have no sin? Do you really believe that receiving an Academy Award reflects God's approval---that God is rewarding you for having no sin? And conversely: do you think that the young girl who was shot, when caught in the cross-fire between two rival gangs, died because of her sins? Because she wasn't blessed?

You see where I am going with this. It drives me nuts when I hear these kinds of claims because, not only are they examples of bad theology, they reduce our relationship with God to a caricature.

In Luke, Jesus is saying: None of you are so special that you don't need to repent. If you are blessed; all are blessed. This practice of being Christian is not a zero-sum game; we are not living on a playing field as if the point is to watch God's scoreboard to see who's got the most blessings. "Hmmm, I see ole' Bob over there is doing pretty well...God must be blessing him like crazy."

If you claim to be blessed and regard your wonderful life as evidence, you don't have to *say* the ugly converse (those with difficult lives are *not* blessed) because it has already been implied. This is why sorting out sins and blessings based on what your life looks like is a trick bag. We want so much for God's ways to be that simple, but woe to those who do.

But this is only the first point Jesus makes in today's Gospel reading. Jesus said, "Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Not only is it bad theology to claim being blessed for the good in our lives; Jesus warns that we ought not purr and coo over our possessions. In God's eyes the only difference between the man driving his Mercedes and the man pedaling his second-hand bike with the missing front fender is *which direction they are going*. Are you driving, pedaling, walking, running *toward* God or *away* from God?

In the chapter that precedes today's reading, Jesus is giving a lot of dire warnings. The central thread that runs through these warnings is a call to be faithful to God. Jesus is quite clear that more is required than simply wanting to run with him. There are things we need to do to prepare ourselves to run toward God---to receive God. Verse 35 in chapter 12 quotes Jesus as advising his disciples to "Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning..." And he goes on to describe how being prepared is vital to participating in God's grace. We must "gird our loins" ---a curious, almost quaint sounding piece of advice in today's world.

In ancient days, girding one's loins was a very specific kind of instruction. It was not a general warning, as in "brace yourselves." It was, if you will allow me this Angeleno

insight, a kind of fashion advice: pull up the hem of your tunic, pull it between your legs and bind it up—gird it—with your belt. Do this with the front section toward the back; and repeat with the back section toward the front. Once you’ve got your tunic properly secured you will be in shorts—in the style of the day--- and you can run, unhindered.

You are now prepared to run without getting bound up by your tunic.

“Gird your loins” was an instruction to get ready for battle or a strenuous task; in the Gospels it becomes a metaphor. One must take the necessary steps to recognize and receive the presence of God in their lives. To prepare the way; to spread the Good News; to prepare to carry on the work Jesus had started. Jesus was saying this because he knew there was not much time to dilly-dally.

The Jesus of the Lukan Gospel is the Jesus who demands compassion for the needy; this Jesus preaches radical inclusion---he wants no one left out because of political or social ideas of “us” and “them.” He recognizes the importance of women and rejects practices that marginalize them. He reminds the disciples that faith in God demands a response to those in need, on the Sabbath or any other day. There is never a day or time or season when we should withdraw our ability to serve, to heal, and to pull others inside the circle of justice and compassion. Jesus demands that his disciples understand these things and that they do them: immediately.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus tells the parable about the fig tree that did not bear fruit. The owner wanted to cut it down because it was useless. But the vine dresser said, “Let it alone, tend to it carefully and if it bears fruit next year, good, but if not, you can cut it down.”

The fig tree, a metaphor for ancient Israel, is not bearing fruit and is in imminent danger of God’s wrath. Yet, the fig tree is spared a little while. “Tend to it” said the vinedresser. God—the vinedresser—grants the nation more time to make sure that it has everything it needs to bear the fruit of faithfulness to God---if then it still does not bear fruit, it will be lost.

Today more than ever before, I feel the urgency in Jesus’ words. In today’s Old Testament reading in Isaiah, the urgent words of warning bear a striking resemblance to the state of *our* nation. I wonder: what would those ancient Hebrew prophets say if they were living amongst us today?

The prophet in Isaiah instructs: “Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts.” In other words, there is still time to return to God, but the wicked must stop their wicked ways. If they do not, the entire nation will suffer. Isaiah warned of the wages of greed; of worshipping false idols of wealth and power; of rulers who did not repent; who did not tend to the poor and the needy---this all sounds as though he could be talking to us about our world today.

Our armed services men and women risk life and limb only to receive appalling and sub-standard medical care as veterans. Americans who are poor---but who are working---do

not have adequate healthcare. Our once lauded public education system continues to flounder causing parents to buy adequate education at private schools. Our neighborhood schools are no longer populated by the kids next door----further eroding our social fabric.

But even worse, our current government exercises a degree of arrogance that seems to have stunned many of us into silence. The Patriot Act is at odds with our civil liberties; we have federal prosecutors getting fired because they would not bend to the will of partisan politics; the President's men, in an effort to silence criticism, put a federal undercover agent in harm's way---a crime that has been only lightly punished; and our government, fueled by a distorted notion of American exceptionalism, warns other countries not to build nuclear bombs while we give a contract to Lawrence Livermore to build a hydrogen bomb.

On Sunday mornings in pulpits across the country, preachers strive to preach the Gospel while also standing in the shadow of the IRS lawsuit at All Saints Church in Pasadena---- a shocking challenge to freedom of religion and freedom of speech. A move that has effectively muted one of the most important places to speak truth to power: the church.

Recently, I had lunch with The Rev. George Regas, Rector Emeritus of All Saints Church. I asked him about the work he is doing through the Regas Institute to challenge social and political injustice. He said that it has been difficult getting local pastors to commit to joining arms and speaking out, together, against injustice. "They are worried about rocking the boat, about making their congregations uncomfortable and they are almost entirely focused on their buildings and feeding the budget demands of their church plants," he told me.

There is an almost palpable sense that our efforts at speaking out are fruitless; that our voices will not be heard; even worse: that no one is listening.

Now more than ever, those in power seem to not be interested in the voices of the dispossessed. Yet, the arrogance of leadership that refuses to listen to the needs of the common folk demands that the volume be turned up. We need prophetic voices to name the sins and warn of the wages of failing to repent; we need prophetic voices to call our leaders to account for their arrogance.

As we hear from Luke's gospel and the prophet Isaiah,  
there is still time.  
There is still time to turn to God.

We need leaders who will gird their loins, not as preparation for war, but as a Lenten practice---a practice of the faithful seeking union with the God of justice and compassion. We need leaders who, like the fig tree given another year, will understand the urgency, take in the nurture and tenderness of God and bear the fruits of compassion and justice.

There is still time to redress the wrongful neglect of Katrina survivors.

There is still time to stop political grandstanding while young men and women, who love this country, die and are disabled in a fog of war.

There is still time to save our environment from irreparable devastation.

There is still time to support love and commitment between two people---gay or straight.

There is still time to serve the poor with living wages.

There is still time to serve the sick with adequate healthcare.

There is still time to serve the oppressed with a justice system that is impartial and truly “just.”

Today’s reading in Isaiah ends:

“For my thoughts are not your  
thoughts,  
Neither are your ways my ways,  
says the Lord.  
For as the heavens are higher than  
the earth,  
So are my ways higher than your  
ways,  
And my thoughts than your  
thoughts.”

We are not God. No one of us dare presume that stance. We must not be silenced by the would-be gods who have deluded themselves to believe that they do know the mind of God; that their ways are God’s ways; and horror of horrors, that their thoughts are higher than God’s.

The call of the Christian faith is a call to glorify God by serving those in need and by seeking justice in all things. We cannot do this if we let go our hope. We cannot do this if we are not ready. We cannot do this if we are trying to run in skirts---with loose ends and unnecessary hindrances serving as obstacles.

It is time to make concrete the grace of God.  
It is time to make straight the way for justice, peace, and compassion.  
It is time for the radical inclusion of the Gospel.  
It is Lent and it is time to prepare.

Gird your loins.

Amen.