

The film, “Even Though The Whole World Is Burning” tells about the poet W. S. Merwin’s long endeavor to restore native trees to the devastated soil of Maui. Decades of deforestation, cattle grazing, and pineapple farming had washed all the topsoil away. When Merwin began planting in the 1970s, even the native trees could not grow.

In the opening couplet of his poem “Place,” he says, “On the last day of the world / I would want to plant a tree.” For forty years, he planted a tree every day that he could, restoring nineteen acres of land in Haiku, Hawaii, even as it seemed the world might well be ending, first from military conflict and then from ecological crisis. The palm forest, like Merwin’s poetry, has become a kind of prophetic stance against contemporary life: bearing witness to individual, almost foolish acts of creativity while devastation abounds. <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-palm-trees-and-poetry-of-w-s-merwin> I am going to argue today that Merwin’s tree-planting is what Jesus means by “repentance.” It is a stance of radical participation with God, at all costs, as an insistence on real life.

In today’s reading Jesus seems tired and cranky. Some people come up to ask him questions about the meaning of suffering, and he snaps at them. Pilate had apparently killed some Jewish pilgrims at the Temple, which seems like the kind of thing that should outrage God and cause lightning to strike . . . but crickets. Their deaths went without any divine retribution at all. Jesus’ questioners want to know if he thinks those people had somehow sinned worse than others, so that they deserved their fate. Without acknowledging the long history of this question, or asking his questioners more about possible alternative explanations, Jesus just

snaps, “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” He reminds them of more of a natural disaster that had happened, when a tower fell on 18 people whose only crime was being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and says they didn’t deserve that fate either, but that his listeners will perish too if they don’t repent.

I think he’s tired of people’s careful parsing out of individual culpability or virtue, the constant kind of scorekeeping that religious people can fall into. Even though the question about suffering is a serious one, it can become not so much a conversation or a mystery as a way to game out how the system must work. Surely if we just figure it out, we can make suffering go away. Well, it’s not actually a system, and suffering doesn’t go away.

Jesus must be feeling so burnt out. Here he’s turned himself inside out for years, trying to show people the kingdom of God, and they’re casually walking away from him to check out the other wisdom teachers, or asking him pointless questions, or competing with each other for status—just totally not getting it. Finally he has, as Luke says, “turned his face toward Jerusalem”—decided to push his way into the fox’s den for a showdown—and quite frankly he’s may be wondering about the cost versus the benefits. He could die for these people, and they’d just spend a couple days hiding from his killers and then wander off randomly to do whatever they used to do. Does it make any difference at all what he does?

You see his pain in the lament, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were

not willing!" There is nothing starry-eyed about Jesus on his way to Jerusalem; he is suffering already even before he gets there and sets his calamity in motion. But he is going, nevertheless.

This might leave us, his followers, in a sort of grim limbo, if it weren't for the parable of the fig tree and the word "repent." "Unless you repent," Jesus tells his questioners, "you will all perish just as they did." Repentance is not just feeling remorseful for all the bad stuff you've done; the word in Greek is about thinking and perception. It implies a reorientation of yourself toward God. A reorientation. Your behavior might indeed change, but repentance first involves seeing things differently and coming to a new understanding of what God makes possible. [Matt Skinner]

Part of what Jesus wants us to see differently is time. He tells this parable of a fig tree that bore no fruit, whose owner thought it was time to give up on it and cut it down so a more productive tree could be planted in its place. However, the gardener persuaded him to give it another year, during which he'd lavish extra resources on it, just to make sure it couldn't bear fruit. The gardener is playing a longer game than the owner. A casual observer might walk by the vineyard and think, "What a waste of space that fig tree is!" but that's an assumption made without knowing any context, without knowing about the conversation and the gardener's time frame. The casual observer doesn't know about the intensive program of fertilizing and pruning underway. When you know those things, your perspective is reoriented or, to use Jesus' word, you *repent*, you turn away from your first casual impression.

Richard Rohr has been writing lately about the Trinity as an experience rather than a doctrine. He has taken on the unfortunate task of trying to express the ineffable through the written word, which is doomed to failure, but I'll join him in his folly, because I think he's trying to lead his readers to a similar kind of repentance. Richard Rohr likes the concept of Trinity for God because it's dynamic, always in motion, always mutual and self-giving. He says:

Part of the reason Christians got off track is that around the time of the Enlightenment we tried to stand apart from and objectify God, as if we could explain God using scholastic philosophy and theology and rational, objective thinking.

The mystics would say whenever you stand apart and objectify anything you stop knowing it. You have to love, respect, and enter into relationship with what you desire to know. Then the mirroring goes back and forth, subject to subject, center to center, love to love. Then the loving becomes its own kind of knowing. This is knowing by participation.

He has spent several weeks trying to give readers a reorientation to God, and sometimes it just makes your eyes cross, but it's important, because I think he's right, we've often seen God as some version of an old man on a throne who can make things happen, when God is "knowable" only through relationship or participation. In another letter he says that God is not the dancer but the dance. You know God as you participate in the dance.

Repentance, then, is being able to see that fig tree through the eyes of one who is actively engaged in saving it. You don't see a fruitless fig tree; you see a tree being given sustenance and attention. You see the place of the fig tree in the gardener's long-term vision. As Matt Skinner says, repentance

means coming to discover God as the source of sustenance, belonging, meaning and hope in this difficult life and into future existence. Repentance names the change that occurs within us when God meets us and reshapes our

understanding. Repentance is a way of aligning ourselves with the God who cares for all the world and wishes to enlist our help in ushering in newness, relief and justice.

Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem, despite the warnings of the Pharisees about Herod, because even though he's tired and cranky, he participates in God's activity of loving and healing and revitalizing, and he couldn't not. Even though God's grace, mercy and justice are not on the top layer that you can see, he knows they're there because God's there. So he goes with what God's doing because that's so much better than surviving by avoiding what God's doing.

We plant trees, too, and we serve food and we organize people against organized money. It looks futile sometimes, and we get frustrated and discouraged. But it is not futile, because life consists of participating with God—not winning once and for all, but being in the dance.

Let us pray.

Lord of Peace ... we are not always as willing as we should be, nor as patient as we could be, to let you dig around our roots, break open our hearts, and gather us as one. Yet still you work in and through us, refusing to give up on this world you love so much.

Thank you for setting love in perpetual motion and for showing us, through the frustrated passion of Christ today, how much it matters to you that we do our part to help keep it going.

For the sake of the world, Lord, let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me. Amen.