

3rd Sunday in Lent Sermon Transcript - March 23-25

How do you like those apples?

[Laughter]

There's a method to the madness there.

That is that we thought chimes might be a way of bringing us together.

It's important that communities have conversation together,

and that this sort of allows us then to make that move from conversation to worship.

So we thought we'd try that for a while and see how that goes.

We're doing communion a bit differently too,

so if you would allow Bart to man-splain it, or Bart-splain it,

pastor-splain it, something-splain it.

We have been trying for the last few weeks of having us come forward

and forming a line that is parallel to the front pews,

so that you are facing the altar.

And we think it would work best if the folk from this side use this side as best you can,

and likewise here.

And then once you've communed, there are trays for the individual glasses,

so you can put your glass there, and if you would return to your seat by way of the side aisle,

we think that just might work.

The other item that was new to us last week, and someone said,

"Well, we kind of liked this," was using the Psalm from the hymn book

and not having it printed in the bulletin.

So we'll try it again and see how this works.

But there is a handy-dandy way to find the Psalms that I learned.

Oh, it was...

I remember it like it was last week because it was.

That it's... Which page did you get, Lily?

337, I think?

Yes. So if you go to the front of the hymn a little to 337,

that's where the Psalms begin, and then you can work your way forward

and find the Psalms from there.

So is that checking out for you?

Looks like that worked. Great.

I think the only other aspect of navigating our worship is

you will need to be somewhat nimble as you go from the front section of the hymn with the dialogue

on page 310 to the hymn which is toward the back.

And that's page 445, or hymn 445.

So you might find yourself marking your place there just to get from one to the other.

Well, it's been a quiet week, and like we'll be gone, no, it hasn't.

It has been yet another week, hasn't it, where we keep hearing these just stories that are bewildering and troubling and scary.

And some of us actually wonder, "Well, why doesn't God just roll up the sleeves

and knock a couple of heads? A little smiting. That would be good."

Well, I have to admit, sometimes I think that too.

I would want God to be very selective about smiting. I mean, I don't want to be the smitee, right?

But I have targets, you know, all lined out that I can suggest to the Lord if God is ever interested.

And then I end up reading a parable, like the one about a fig tree that didn't bear fruit

and the owner thinks should be chopped down, chunked.

And the mindor of the garden says, "No, let's give it a year."

I think maybe that parable tells us something, and we're going to hear it read today,

and we might spend a little time just reflecting on what that parable might mean for those of us

who are troubled, who are perplexed, and maybe just don't know what to think these days.

I'm looking at you as I describe that, and I know that sounds a little somber,

so I'll ask you what I asked the first group. Is that lent enough for you?

[Music]

[Music]

[Music]

The Holy Gospel according to St. Luke, the 13th chapter.

At that very time, there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans,

whose blood pilot mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus asked them,

"Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way,

that they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?"

"No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will perish as they did."

Or those 18 who were killed when the Tower of Siloam fell on them.

Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the other people living in Jerusalem?

"No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Then he told this parable,

"A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came looking for fruit on it and found none."

So he said to the one working the vineyard,

"See here for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none."

"Cut it down. Why should it be wasting the soil?"

And the tender of the vineyard replies,

"Sir, let it alone for one more year until I dig around it, put manure on it,

and if it bears fruit next year, well and good.

But if not, you can cut it down."

The Gospel of our Lord.

"Graciously, Lord, be seated."

"Won't you be seated?"

Sermon

Grace and peace to you.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you.

Oh God, our strength and our Redeemer.

Amen.

So Jesus, where is God when a ruthless dictator murders people and desecrates their bodies?

And where was God when a tower fell and crushed some 18 people?

I think people were, I think they were right in asking those questions.

Consider the Legion of Doom under whom they lived.

Caesar, Herod, Pilate.

And there weren't elections.

This is what people were stuck with.

Lives of misery that could be ended at the whim and caprice of the one who put himself in the place of God.

Caesar.

So where is God in this mess?

And perhaps, why doesn't God do a little judicious smiting?

Okay, so did you notice in the Psalm we read today that we stopped at verse 8?

I see some smiling because some of you were right ahead, didn't you?

The Psalm also goes places that we don't go in church world

because we're not comfortable there and we don't know what to do with this.

Those people who seek my life, would it be that they go down to the pit, which means they should be toast?

Or maybe they should be jackal food. Yeah, that would do it.

You think I'm making this up, don't you?

Read those extra verses.

I'm not saying that that sentiment is right,

but I think if we don't admit to ourselves that yes, this is how we think,

and maybe that parable of the fig tree doesn't do much for us or to us,

we would love it if God flexed some muscle and did these things like making jackal food of Caesar and Herod and what's his face, Pilate.

But what happens if God says, "Okay, I'll answer that prayer and I'll see you five more

and rolls up the sleeves and starts chucking lightning bolts?"

Then God becomes an overgrown Caesar. That's what happens.

This is why Isaiah says what Isaiah says.

My ways are not your ways, people. My thoughts are not your thoughts, people.

Earlier this week in the context of a pastoral visit, somebody asked me if the world is going to hell in a handbasket.

Oh, pardon my language, handcart.

Thanks for laughing because that joke did not work at 9 o'clock this morning.

Glad I worked here. So, enough of that.

I mean, isn't that kind of our worry? But I think this parable of the vineyard is a what if parable.

What if it's not? What if God has something else in mind?

But it starts with the notion of repentance, which literally means a turning around of your mind, a radical shift in perspective.

So instead of thinking about those people crushed by the tower of Siloam as having somehow brought it upon themselves,

or the people who were slaughtered by Pilate as somehow being complicit, Jesus

says that's not what's happening here.

That our minds need to be turned away from that kind of thinking and toward something else.

And the something else is the story of the fig tree.

What if God acts like the gardener, not necessarily the owner of the fig tree and its little vineyard?

I don't know, do figs grow on vineyards? Help me out. No, they don't. I'm using those words improperly.

We did learn this week, doing a little Google searching and conversing with people who have direct personal experience in the world of figs, a little bit about them.

Did you know that it takes at least three years for a fig tree to begin to produce?

You don't just plunk them in the ground and expect figs in three minutes.

Might that be a reflection on God's nature?

But here we gallop in, oh, okay, time's up, spend your three minutes, let's go, chop it down.

Well, after your three, that's still kind of pushing it to expect something.

But I think that gardener knew something about the long game.

I have a hunch, and I could be wrong, but this gardener probably knew.

So it'll come about. I'll just keep doing what I'm doing.

But I'll make it look like I'm doing something new, that I'm loosening soil, I'm adding amendments, I'm watering, I'm doing all these things that I did already anyway.

And it will come about in its own good time.

What if the gardener is God, or Jesus, pleading the case for a fig tree?

The whole ball of wax, as my dad would have said, creation, humanity, all of it.

What if God's posture toward it all is tender care and patience?

Might that lead us to a radical shift in our thinking?

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., like to say that darkness does not drive out darkness, and hate does not defeat hate.

Only love can do that.

It might be another way of calling us back to the parable of the fig tree.

Another way of calling us back to the way God does things.

Not our way, even though we wish sometimes it were different, and results were quicker.

So where does that lead us?

I wish I knew, exactly.

I only know vaguely, but I am wanting to lean in and hang on to this story of a God who is patient, and who knows the way things will unfold, even though we don't.

I don't think that means we get to sit on the sidelines and be observers, whether it's anxious or detached.

If we are grafted into the story of those liberated slaves wandering the wilderness and finding a promised land,

if we are grafted into God's great and grand story of the Restoration of All Things, then we are both recipient and participant, aren't we?

I think I'm going to throw the book at you, so to speak.

Would you mind turning in your hymnals to our baptism service? It starts on page 227.

But we are going to look at a line in the middle of page 228.

This is what we say when we come forward to be baptized, or we bring others forth to be baptized.

I'm going to read down several lines, but let's start with what it is that we think is the outcome of living in our baptism.

"From Christ through word indeed, to care for others and the world God made, and to work for justice and peace."

In the context of today's parable, let's pretend that the amending of the soil and the loosening of it

and the pruning and all the things that you would do until next year would be things like proclaiming Christ in word indeed

by caring for the world that God made, and yes, by working for justice and peace.

Just as our mindset would be to ask God to smite when God would rather be patient and let things come about in ways that aren't violent.

Likewise, our mindset is that we need to do all of this and make all of this happen by ourselves.

That's why my friend and former Bishop Elaine Sauer would say, "We have God, we have each other."

That's what we need to do what we are called to do.

Even in a time such as this, that is so scary, so unpredictable.

But while some of us worry that maybe the world is going to hell in a handcart,

the witness of Scripture and the witness of those who have gone on before us is to say, "No, that's not the destination at all."

Even though this is a really messed up part of the trip, we are moving toward God's grand design of reconciling all things

and the restoration of all things.

I think that's what a fig tells us today.

Amen.