

LENT 3 C            March 20, 2022  
 Pastor Barbara Johnson<sup>i</sup>, University Lutheran Church of Hope  
 Isaiah 55:1-9, Psalm 63:1-8, Luke 13:1-9  
 “The Story Isn’t Over Yet”

Grace and peace to you - beloved people of God.

This morning we hear the prophet Isaiah say,  
 “Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters...”  
 Come buy wine and milk without money - without a price”

And then in Psalm 63 the writer says,  
 “My soul thirsts for you O God, in a weary land where there is no water.”

In Luke’s gospel, we hear the voices of those who clamor for explanations and understanding.

They want to know WHY innocent people are killed  
 they want to know WHO to blame for the bad things that happen -  
 and they want to HOW they, themselves, can avoid getting caught in the crossfire. Maybe,  
 they want some kind of assurance that they themselves are not to blame

In all of these voices, what we DO hear is the voice of humanity.  
 Human beings - full of their own wants and needs, full of anguish and grief.  
 A voice for the voiceless - for those who are truly hungry and thirsty:  
 for food and water, for justice and truth, for safety and peace of mind.  
 Hungry and thirsty - for healing ... for love ... for life.

Age old voices - yes. But now they belong to us.  
We want some guidance and direction on how to have our own  
 physical, emotional and spiritual needs met.  
 And when we cannot achieve those things on our own - we turn to God -  
 looking for answers, looking for some sign that we have been heard -  
 some sign that God exists - some sign that God cares.

These days - the news is saturated with images and stories of the war on Ukraine -  
 we see people who are literally dying from dehydration as civilians are cut off from water  
 and food, medicine and other life-saving measures.

We hear Putin’s lies at a rally of thousands in Moscow  
 calling the illegal invasion a “liberation” of the Ukrainian people,  
 all the while using the bible !! to talk about how valiant his soldiers are -  
 that they would give up their lives for love of the neighbor.

What Putin calls “loving the neighbor” is blasphemous.

I must confess - in my own heart of hearts - in this situation  
I do not have a spirit of forgiveness in me  
I am neither forgiving, nor generous in my judgement.  
I want God to smite him.

I’m not proud of that reaction.  
It comes from a place of fear...anger... and hatred.  
But not love.

Some days, we desire an “Equalizer” God  
One who will step into the chaos with guns blazing - eliminating evil forces, and rescuing  
the innocents.  
Assuming, of course, that we ourselves are among the “innocents” - the righteous ones.

But that is not reality, is it?  
It’s a TV show - that lulls us into thinking that by eliminating a few dangerous thugs each  
week, we can somehow feel safer when we turn off the TV and go to bed.

Like the people who came to Jesus - wanting to know who to blame for senseless tragedy,  
and wanting to know: Do people deserve what they get?  
We ask our own “either/or” kinds of questions.

The randomness of life is terrifying for most of us. And we want straight-line answers.  
We want to make sense of our world, and when we cannot, we blame ourselves, or others,  
and almost certainly, even WE wonder - WHERE is GOD ?

So here we are - on a safe and sunny Sunday morning.  
We pray our prayers, we sing our songs, and we read our sacred scriptures

And what is it that gets our attention in this Gospel?  
It’s Jesus’ refusal to answer our questions.  
Instead, he says “repent” !  
Repent - turn around - take another look.  
Don’t judge the souls of people you don’t even know. Look inside yourselves.

Jesus does not address the questions with simple answers.  
Instead he tells a story that lets the listeners draw their own conclusions.

We all heard the parable...

**There is a fig tree** that, in 3 years, has not produced any fruit.

**There is a vineyard owner** who views the tree as worthless - taking up valuable space in the orchard. He wants it GONE.

**And then there is the gardener...**the one who begs on behalf of the tree  
He asks for one more year. He commits to digging around it, fertilizing it, and giving it space and time and some extra care.

Jesus seems to understand the human heart - the human mind.

Every one of us - unique and different in our own thought processes.

Most of us will gladly listen to a story -

- rather than sitting quietly while someone in the pulpit preaches at us.

So I invite you to consider putting yourself into the story. Ponder these ideas:

**What if YOU are the fig tree** that has not been productive for three years?

Compared to all the other trees in the orchard - it's failing to thrive.

Whose fault is that anyway? How will you ever get what you need?

**What if you are the vineyard owner?**

The practical one who can't imagine any reason to keep it in the orchard.

It costs money to grow a tree. Of course, it's an investment!

You can sell the fruit and make a nice profit.

But when there is no fruit? There is no return on your investment.

**What if you are the gardener?**

The one who commits to patience, feeding, watering, fertilizing... nurturing?

What drives you to keep at it? Why do you even care about a tree?

Okay...let's TURN around again - change perspective - and put GOD into the story.

Those who pelted Jesus with questions want to know where God is in all of this.

So the parable might also challenge them - and US to think about God in a new way.

**What if God is like the vineyard owner** - with high expectations and disdain for anything that cannot be productive? Is that who God is for you? Keeping a ledger on each of our accomplishments, each of our mistakes. Hmm?

**What if God is like the gardener** - One who knows what is needed for a fig tree - or a person - to thrive. Is your concept of God like a gardener who can see beyond the bark? The one who is patient and committed to nurturing, feeding, fertilizing and caring? I hope so. I'd vote for that one.

The fig tree parable leaves us trusting that the story is not over yet.  
But it also leaves us with a sense of urgency.  
The time is now - to repent - to turn around - to take another look.

There is great urgency in our news feeds.  
We feel so helpless when we see people in trouble, people in need of care, but we're too far away from "ground zero" to offer anything but our money and our prayers.

And yet -we are not helpless - not when we open our eyes and look around.  
We CAN see the urgency in our own lives, our own homes, our own neighborhoods.  
THE TIME IS NOW:

to weep with someone who is weeping,  
to fight for the justice we long to see,  
to confront evil where it needs confronting,  
to learn the art of patience, hope-filled tending,  
To encourage tender new lives, to love the ones you're with  
to cultivate beautiful things.

To quote - again - after all these years of ministry  
the beloved words of **Gerhard Frost**: "Look Again"  
Look again - at what God has placed before you,  
A place, a situation, an idea, a person, a face  
Especially the face of one you love - or hate  
of ONE you take for granted, or ignore, or one prejudged and now avoided.  
There never was a human face that wasn't worth another look.

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The fig tree parable has an open ending... open for possibilities.  
It's a parable about grace - yes.  
We don't know if "another year" will make any difference.  
But with the commitment of the gardener - we are never left alone to fend for ourselves.  
With the love and grace of God...  
With the voice of Jesus in our ears  
With the breath of the Spirit breathing new life into us every day  
we are always left with a glimmer of light, a glimmer of love, a glimmer of HOPE.  
There is always hope.

May it ever be so. Amen

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<sup>i</sup> Written in collaboration with Pastor Karin Moberg, Fargo, ND, and with appreciation for the work of Rev Janet Hunt, Debie Thomas, Gerhard Frost and countless others along the way.

Second glances on the Monday morning after:

I was reminded that in this sermon I did not ask the 3<sup>rd</sup> question:

**What if God was like the beleaguered fig tree?**

I often wonder if sometimes God doesn't Just. Get. Tired.

What if our relationship with God was totally dependent on US and our ability to maintain the connection. If we were not willing to commit to feeding and watering and fertilizing that relationship, what if God was so hard-pressed that God could not produce any fruit that we could actually see and eat?

Think about that.

My profound thanks to Kirsten Mebust for recognizing that the assurances we seek, assurances about who God is and how God is in relationship with us, showed up in the Hymn of the Day that followed the sermon above.

**ELW Hymn # 334 Tree of Life and Awesome Mystery** by Marty Haugen

It's worth another look. Read all nine verses and see how they say exactly what we need to be reminded of.

Peace to you

Pastor Barbara Johnson