

Lent3_YrC_022816_mcr
All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of *God*, whose steadfast love endures forever. Amen.

Our *Gospel* story today begins with an odd conversation between Jesus and "some who were present."

Here's my paraphrase:

Some people from Alabama told Jesus about the folks in Washington, Kansas, and Michigan, whose blood was spilled over the last few days, and he asked them, "Do you think that they were worse sinners than all you Alabamians?"

"No!" he said, "but unless y'all (he said y'all) change your minds about doing something to stop this violence, y'all will lose your lives, not the way that they did, but you will lose them because you are cut off from God. Repentance isn't related to your death - it's related to your life."

If someone does something bad to us, is it OK for us to do something bad to them in return? Do we live by 'an eye for an eye' or by 'two wrongs don't make a right'?

The U.S. has the highest prison population in the world, the majority of which is incarcerated for non-violent crimes. Does that do anyone any good? Thirty-one states still legalize the death penalty. In 2015, 28 inmates were executed and nearly 3000 are on death row.

There are 41 different wars or conflicts in the world as we sit here, some of which have been going on for almost 70 years. More than 160,000 people around the world died last year because of armed conflict.

Were all of those people who died last year bad people? Or good people? Who knows? It's not our job to make that judgment. That's *God's* department.

It's increasingly hard to believe for ourselves - much less convince anyone else to believe - that forgiveness, rather than judgment and punishment, is what we are supposed to be about.

Many of the political (so-called) 'debates' this year started by demonizing entire populations, gave way to promises to "carpet bomb" countries in order to destroy the bad few, and now are just yelling matches attacking everything from personalities to clothes, to how much TV makeup they wear.

How do we explain to our children and grandchildren that there is a better way?

Well, Jesus follows his conversation with a parable about a man who had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. After it had been growing for three years and had yet to bear any fruit, the owner told the gardener to cut it down. But the gardener said, "Let's give it another chance. I'll dig around it and put some fertilizer on it. If it does what a fig tree is supposed to do, that will be great, but if it doesn't, then we can cut it down."

The story is simple and straightforward. This is not an allegory. The owner is being reasonable - the tree is unproductive and is taking up space, using up water and fertilizer and is not giving him any return on his investment. The gardener thinks the tree deserves one more chance, and he offers patience and mercy by doing everything he can to get the tree to be all it can be.

But we don't know how the story will end. Will fruit grow on the tree in time to avoid the ax? How do the gardener's efforts make the tree's life a state of grace and opportunity?

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When I sat down to write this homily yesterday, a thought popped into my mind of an example for this parable, and I couldn't get rid of it. I tried to put it aside. I wrote almost the whole thing, thinking, 'should I put it in or should I dump it?' I couldn't decide. Finally, I thought, 'I might as well go for it.' So here it is.

When I was a kid, I spent my summers as, first, a camper and then a counselor at a camp in the country outside of Nashville. After meals in the dining hall, we always

sang songs while the tables were cleared and before we left the hall for activities. One of the songs we sang was called Little Bunny FooFoo.

Little Bunny FooFoo hopping through the forest,
Scooping up the field mice and boppin' 'em on the head.
Down came the good fairy and she said,
"Little Bunny FooFoo, I don't want to see you
Scooping up the field mice and bopping them on the head.
I'll give you three more chances, and if you don't behave, I'll turn you into a goon."

Little Bunny FooFoo hopping through the forest,
Scooping up the field mice and boppin' 'em on the head.
Down came the good fairy and she said,
"Little Bunny FooFoo, I don't want to see you
Scooping up the field mice and boppin' 'em on the head.
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Little Bunny FooFoo hopping through the forest,
Scooping up the field mice and bopping them on the head.
Down came the good fairy and she said,
"Little Bunny FooFoo, I don't want to see you
Scooping up the field mice and bopping them on the head.
I gave you three chances, and you didn't behave. Now you're a goon! POOF!"

The moral of the story is: HARE TODAY, GOON TOMORROW

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Obviously, we can be compared to the fig tree: are we bearing fruit? That is, are we doing and being everything we are made to do and be? But maybe we can also be compared to Little Bunny FooFoo. We are all called to take a look at our lives and to

consider where we might need to change, to turn in a new direction - and when necessary, we get another chance.

Repentance is not meant to be defined, as it often is, as moral uprightness or expressions of regret. If it is, we fall into the trap of judging others, paying attention to things that don't really matter in the grand scheme of things, instead of learning new ways of seeing and of being persuaded to adopt a different perspective.

If we are honest with ourselves, none of us can say that we are everything God made us to be. None of us does all that God invites us to do. All of us would benefit from being cultivated, from having our faith freshened up, and most of us could use some fertilizer - that is, maybe some spiritual instruction or meditation and prayer.

This season of Lent isn't about sin and repentance because God cares about the silly little things we do. Lent is about sin because God cares about us. God cares about a world of increasing violence and isolation, and God cares about our isolation from each other and from Godself. Redemption restores relationship, and in restoration there is hope that we are not alone.

Our God is the God of grace, the God of love, the God of mercy, and the God of forgiveness. May we grow into the people we are called to be, with mercy, love and forgiveness for all.