

Lent III Year C 2019

So Mardi Gras is over.... We're now in the middle of Lent... The season of repentance in the church. The lectionary gurus won't let us forget that. All of the scripture during these forty days, Hebrew scripture, the psalms and the selections from the New Testament, all speak of our sinfulness, our suffering, our mortality. The word Lent is from the old English meaning "lengthen." Meant to describe the lengthening of days; the period of time when light in the natural world is on the increase. Medieval theologians reckoned that it was the time in the church year when the faithful allowed the light of truth to reveal our innermost flaws, and our great need for God's saving grace. This season was not known as Lent in the very early church. In the early church it was known as the Easter fast. It was the period of preparation for Baptism which would occur at the Great Vigil of Easter. It was forty days, harkening to Israel's forty year sojourn in the desert of Sinai; and to Jesus' forty days of testing in the Judean desert.... Forty days of preparation which included fasting, and study, and reflection, and prayer. It was a time of repentance, that is, the conscious turning from one's illusions toward awareness; a time of heightened attention to prepare for the great feast of the Resurrection. In the early church it was a season of rapt anticipation and hope.

During the Middle ages things changed. The great Easter Fast became a time of emphasizing human sinfulness, almost to self-loathing. Those of you who remember Morning Prayer will remember the line from the General Thanksgiving, written during the late middle ages “we thine unworthy servants give you humble and hearty thanks.” You may remember the prayer of humble access which was written at the same time, “we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs from under your table.” Those prayers were emblematic of this change which honed in on human depravity in relation to God. So the purpose of Lent has become one of being duly shriven before we reach the day of Resurrection.

Our Gospel reading for today has, over the many years, been interpreted in that light. Throughout the legacy of middle and modern English, commentator after commentator, and preacher after preacher, have interpreted this passage this way: Don't try to figure out why or who God punishes. No one is any more sinful than the rest of us. We are all sinners in need of repentance. Calamity is God's justice for a sinful world. But through Christ Jesus, God is merciful. “A man had a fig tree in his vineyard”, and it wouldn't bear fruit... so he tells his gardener to cut it down.... But the gardener intercedes and advises the owner of the vineyard to give the tree another year in which to produce... The gardener says

he'll fertilize it and if it still won't bear figs then the owner can have his way and cut it down.

So the preacher then says, or at least every preacher I've heard... and that's assuming that the preacher didn't chicken out and opt for the Old Testament lesson or Paul's letter for this Sunday, like I almost did... The preacher says that the owner of the vineyard is God, and the tree is all of us sinners, and the gardener is Jesus who intercedes on our behalf... basically the gardener is buying us some time to repent before God gets all extroverted and comes down hard on us. The time is short, so you better get right with God before it's too late. Now I'm exaggerating a bit, but you get the point.

So I want to offer another way of looking at the parable of the Fig Tree... but first a little context.... Luke is writing his Gospel in the late first century. The community that produced this Gospel probably lived in Antioch or Rome, but they were well aware of the goings on in Jerusalem. Some five to ten years before the writing of this Gospel Jerusalem was razed by a Roman legion. The city was burned to the ground including the Temple built by Herod the Great a hundred years before. This violence was meant as a deterrent to a smoldering Jewish insurrection against the empire. Thousands of Jerusalemites were killed or

deported. It was possibly the darkest and most violent time in Israel's history. In our passage we just read Jesus is told of Pilate slaughtering some people of Galilee, but Pilate lived a generation earlier than the writing of this text. The audiences' memory would be fixed on recent events, namely the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and the ensuing genocide. So what I'm saying is that this passage is anti-empire propaganda. Luke is speaking to the resistance... and this is typological as well. Throughout Israel's history they have been beset by the oppression of powers and principalities. They were slaves in Egypt; they were routed by the Philistines after entering the so-called Promised Land; they were conquered twice by the Assyrians; they were conquered and captured by the Babylonians... and now Rome.... Israel's biblical History revolves around the question of how will the people of Israel survive the slings and arrows of history and move forward as a people; How will their fortunes be restored by a God who is supposed to Love them?. For the Gospel writers of the New Testament that is what the Jesus Movement is all about. It is a new way forward. It is a way to survive and thrive, and that of course includes having a sense of meaning and purpose.

The fig tree is an image out of Isaiah. Isaiah speaks of Israel as a fig tree, tended by God to bear the fruit of peace and justice for the nations of the world;

and here in this parable the life of the fig tree is threatened by the owner of the vineyard. In the Roman occupied near east property was owned by an elite few, who were absentee landlords. The empire would divide the land they occupied among nobles and generals of the army. All the profits from farmland would go to Rome, in effect. So what we have in this parable is the empire threatening the existence of Israel. And I would argue that for Luke it is the people of faith, the movement, Jesus the archetype that serves as advocate for the victimized of this oppression and injustice. It is the faithful who tend to the tenuous survival of the people God loves. It is no accident that the story that follows this parable is a healing story.... This is about the way forward for Israel.... and it is a way that has been tried and true over Israel's history; a pattern of renewal and restoration.... The resistance, in whatever era Israel found herself, has always been founded on welcoming the stranger, taking care of one's neighbor, healing the sick; non-violence; doing justice, and showing mercy.... Again, these are of Love's pattern, and Love will undermine and mitigate any manner of evil. The writer of John's Gospel refers to the Spirit of God is the Advocate. That's what Love does. Love stands for the good of the other; and in God's alchemy that will subvert even the most intractable structure of sin in our world. This is a story about advocacy in the midst of oppression. The ramifications for us post-modern folk are obvious: we

are to be advocates for the immigrant; we are advocates for the poor; we are advocates for the sick; advocates for prisoners. We are a voice for the voiceless....

Making entreaty to the proverbial owner for mercy.

Legend has it that Saints Francis of Assisi was asked what he would do if he knew that the world was about to end... and his answer was that he would keep hoeing his garden. This story, the parable of the fig tree, is about the merciful persistence of Love.... And that Love can bring life even from the most barren places.... Love can bring joy out of suffering; and new life out of ruin.

Perhaps during these lengthening days, perhaps we should look with a renewed light upon the broken pieces of our illusions. Perhaps it would be worth the effort to seek Love there in the rubble. I believe it is in the broken places that Love takes root. Perhaps our repentance in this our Easter fast is to turn and look, not for our falling short, but for Love's possibilities... For you.... For those for whom you care deeply.... And for those whom you are given to serve.