

St. Giles Episcopal Church
March 7, 2010 – Lent 3
Exodus 3:1-15 and Luke 13:1-9 – The Parable of the Unfruitful Fig Tree
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Before considering this morning's gospel lesson, I would like to look at the Old Testament reading from the book of Exodus. This is a very important passage in the Hebrew Bible. It is the account of God's first appearance at Mount Sinai, also called Mount Horeb – God's appearance to Moses in the burning bush. Tending his father-in-law's flock, Moses was curious about this bush that was blazing but not consumed, so he approached the bush. God called to Moses out of the bush and commissioned him with one of the most important tasks recorded in the Bible – delivering the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt and leading them to the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey. This is the beginning of the great story of the Exodus.

As the text makes clear, God's action on behalf of the Hebrew people comes out of God's compassion. God has observed the misery of the people. God has heard their cry. Knowing their suffering, God has chosen to act through Moses to deliver God's oppressed people. God has acted in history to save God's people.

One feature of the powerful Easter Vigil service that makes it unique is the series of readings from the Old Testament which recount our salvation history, beginning with the story of creation. Only one of the several possible readings is required, and that is the lesson from Exodus, the account of Israel's deliverance at the Red Sea. We all know the story – as Pharaoh pursues the escaping Israelites, God acts through Moses to part the waters of the Red Sea so that the Israelites may cross on dry land and then God lets the waters return and drown the Egyptians. This is the end of the segment of the story that begins with God speaking to Moses from the burning bush.

Why is the Exodus so important to Jews and Christians? Precisely because it is an event in history in which God's saving action on behalf of God's oppressed people is manifest. In our Lenten Bible study class on "Complaining to God" we have read many passages from the Hebrew Bible in which the writers complain to God about their suffering and ask God why God does not deliver them from their troubles and their enemies. You may be able to relate to such complaints. I certainly can. But in the Exodus we find hope – hope that God will hear our cries, attend to our pain, and deliver us from whatever enslaves and oppresses us.

Another important aspect of this morning's lesson from Exodus is that here God reveals God's name to Moses, God's "name forever," God's "title for all generations." The divine name has three forms, I AM WHO I AM, I AM, and YHWH, pronounced Yahweh, which may mean "he who causes to be." The divine name was regarded as too sacred to be pronounced when scripture was read, so either the Hebrew word "Adonai" meaning Lord or "Elohim" meaning God was spoken instead. If you look at your leaflet inserts, you will see on the last line on the first page the word "LORD" in all capital letters. Whenever you see this in the Old Testament lesson or in the Psalms, know that this is an English translation of God's name, Yahweh. Ancient Greek translators used the word "Kyrios" for the divine name. We encountered this word this morning when we prayed the "Kyrie eleison," "Lord, have mercy." One final point – when Jesus prayed to the Father or spoke to people about God, Yahweh is who Jesus meant.

Now let's turn to the gospel lesson, the parable of the unfruitful fig tree – truly a Lenten parable!

This passage from Luke has two parts, an introduction to the parable and the parable itself. Jesus was with a crowd of people, teaching them. Some of the people brought the following event to Jesus' attention. Pilate had ordered some Galileans to be killed while they were making sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem – an awful event in any Jew's mind. Jesus uses the reference to make a point about suffering – those who suffer do not necessarily deserve their suffering because they are sinners. It was an ancient belief that sickness and calamity resulted from sin. That's the position Job's so-called friends took to explain why God visited such sufferings on Job. But Job held onto his argument that he had done nothing to deserve all the trouble that had come upon him. Jesus agrees with Job. And he elaborates his point by referring to the accidental death of eighteen people who were killed when a tower fell on them. Neither the victims of Pilate's malice nor the victims of an accident were worse sinners than those who were spared. These tragic events were not God's judgment for sin. Jesus says, "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." Having gotten the people's attention, he goes on with the parable of the unfruitful fig tree, a fitting parable for Lent because it is about repentance.

In Hebrew scripture the fig tree is a symbol of the individual person, while the vineyard is a symbol of the nation or entire people of Israel. The "man" in the parable is God. The gardener represents what it means to live according to the right precepts that everyone in Israel would know, just as any gardener would understand basic principles of gardening.

"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 gardener, '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 soil?’ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

The fig tree is given another chance to bear fruit, even given the nourishment it needs in order to bear fruit. We can see the mercy of God here, in this opportunity. But God’s mercy is not to be taken for granted as endless. This is the hard truth of the parable. Here is the power behind the call to repentance. At some point the fig tree must bear the fruit it was created to bear or be cut down.

As you know Lent is the season of the church year when each of us is called to self-examination and to repentance. Last week I spoke about how we are called to give up whatever keeps us separated from God, whatever prevents us from being willing to run to Jesus and accept his love. That is one side of the story of what we might call “sin.” The other side of that story is our failure to bear fruit, our falling short of being the loving creatures God has meant us to be. As we say in the General Confession, “Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.” In other words, we have been like the fig tree, failing to bear fruit.

What is the fruit that God is looking for when God looks at us? The humble heart of a person who feels sorrow for sin, a heart of flesh and not of stone. Love in action. Compassion expressed for those who suffer and are in need. True and loving worship of God. Any of the signs of a person who has been fed and nourished by God’s word and sacraments and is growing into the image of God.

So I encourage all of us this Lent to examine our lives in terms of such fruits. If we identify areas where we are not fruitful, we need not despair. Jesus has not said that we must be perfect or else be cut down. Jesus said that we need to repent, to be sorry and to change, with God's help and grace.

If we turn to God in this spirit, we can trust God's mercy. And we can say with the psalmist, "... your loving-kindness is better than life itself... For you have been my helper, and under the shadow of your wings I will rejoice. My soul clings to you; your right hand holds me fast" (Psalm 63:3, 7-8). Amen.