

Pastor's Sermon

March 23, 2025 Lent 3

Just Wait

The season of Lent is a wake-up call for us. Lent is a time for reflection and honest assessment as to who we are and who God is. It is a time to ask what difference does faith make in my life and then take time for correction and growth in faith. Lent is the time for us to see how much we depend upon God's mercy and redirect our lives. Lent is a call for repentance, change of life, change of direction, change of focus.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells a parable about a fig tree that has never bore fruit. In nine years, there hasn't been a single fig. The vineyard owner wonders why this tree was ever planted! He is rightfully upset. The tree is taking up space where a worthwhile tree would produce fruit. He concludes that the only sensible thing to do is cut it down and start over with a more prosperous tree, a logical conclusion. But his hired hand has another idea: wait one more year and see what happens. Give the barren tree a big dose of loving care and see what happens. I know nothing about fig trees, but the gardeners plan seems like a good one. Turn over the soil, feed it with fertilizer and just wait and see.

I sent my crack research team (Google) to provide me with some information about fig trees, how they grow. First of all, I learned that fig trees are abundantly fruitful. They can produce as many as three crops in a single year. So when owner of the vineyard says he has been looking for fruit for three years it means that this little tree has missed nine opportunities to bear fruit. Second, I learned that fig trees thrive on neglect. They need very little care. Those hearing Jesus would find such talk about digging around the roots and putting on fertilizer to encourage fruit production laughable. You didn't baby a fig tree! You just let it go, let it grow, and soon you will see fruit. But not from this tree. In all that time it hasn't put forth the first sign of any fruit. It's a hopeless waste. But the gardener is determined to give it every chance to grow. His opinion is above and beyond any normal practice to spare this tree.

Jesus tells this parable in response to the terrible news of recent tragedies that people were talking about. The Roman governor Pontius Pilate had ordered the slaughter of some Galileans who were offering a sacrifice in the Temple. These Galileans were just carrying out their religious obligation. This slaughter made no sense. These people were innocent. And in the town of Siloam a tower fell, killing 18 innocent people. Why? It made no sense; there was no reasonable explanation for it. Unless, of course, these tragedies were the result of God's judgment non them, a punishment for some secret sin. People will talk.

One year ago, a ship struck the Francis Scott Key bridge in the Baltimore harbor. Fortunately only six people died that night. We ask why such a thing could happen. Was it their fault? Perhaps it was shoddy construction or bad design or an aging infrastructure or official neglect. We look for answers and they all seem to involve some kind of consequence for some sinfulness.

In a few weeks I will be going to Asheville, North Carolina to work with Lutheran Disaster Relief to repair homes that were severely damaged by last years hurricane. Were these people any more sinful people than those us who live here in the Harrisburg area? No, of course not!

Jesus responds to such tragedies by saying that God is not responsible for such events. These were not what insurance companies call "acts of God." God is not about punishment. God does not send hurricanes, winds, and wayward ships to punish sinners. Jesus says that God is rather like the gardener in the parable. God is about steadfast love and patience. Just wait. Perhaps with more love maybe we will turn things around! With a little more care, more time, maybe we will bear fruit like we were designed to do in the first place.

Tragedies happen. God is not the cause of them. God's goodness is not thwarted by such tragedies either. God is not going to let it prevent us from experiencing the love and goodness that God brings. God does understand when we are barren and unproductive because of what is going on in our lives. God's mercy will not allow the fig tree to be cut down just because it hasn't

borne any fruit. God's mercy says, "maybe this tree needs just a bit more love and care before we can expect any fruit."

What if they are just getting over a death in the family, a relationship breakdown, they feel out of sync and there is no fruit? God knows there will be times in life when we have very little to give and we need a lot of extra care. That's why we come together as the church! There are many people, even good church people, who call for the axe to fall because there are no figs on the tree. Productivity is the measure of faith, they say. But that's not God's way. God sees a new future, a new hope, a new tomorrow.

The same is true of congregations. In the last decade, life in this church not exactly been a story of dramatic productivity. The figs have been very few and far between. Many among us thought the axe was being sharpened. "How do you see the future of this church in the next five years?" A few of you see no future at all. New people come through the doors from time to time, but we never hear from them again. Once there was activity, the pews were filled, but now things are pretty gloomy and depressing.

If you had to justify Our Saviour's existence in terms of productivity for the Kingdom of God or service to our local community you might feel the axe is on the way. But God hasn't given up on this place. Most of you here haven't given up either. God doesn't see a useless tree that needs an axe. God sees a tree that needs some digging, some manure, some loving care. God sees a church that needs some nurture, some encouragement to turn things around. We are looking for ways to do just that.

God's goodness and love goes far beyond any rational limits, beyond what seems reasonable or logical. God repeatedly pours out love and opportunity on those who appear to be lost causes. God's love is unconditional. There are no requirements for eligibility, everyone receives that love. We can respond to that love by stepping on to the road, following Jesus, working with Jesus. Working with him to create a world of love and peace and hope. That is what Lenten repentance means. That is the challenge facing us as a church now and into the future. God has been extraordinarily good to us. We are blessed. Growth can happen. It is up to us to produce the fruit. The

future is so important. God has been good to us. We need to take that goodness seriously and plan for an abundant harvest. That is why we are here. It is up to us to turn things around and follow Jesus into a new future, a new future for each us alone and together as God's people in this place. Amen.