

The Third Sunday in Lent, Year C
The Reverend D. S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
March 20, 2022
Exodus 3:1-15
Psalm 63:1-8
1 Corinthians 10:1-13
Luke 13:1-9

Strangely Placed Flora

Why is there a fig tree planted in the vineyard?

It's a vineyard. It's a place for growing grapes. Why is there a fig tree planted in the vineyard?

I asked my Italian friend and colleague about this—my naturalized US citizen, Italian-American friend and sibling priest, the Reverend Canon Licia Affer, canon to the ordinary of our diocese. Before we both served in this diocese we both served in the Diocese of Atlanta. We were in the same clergy group, and she was one of my bridesmaids.

“Why do you think there's a fig tree growing in the vineyard? You must know something about vines and grapes; after all, you're Italian.”

Licia always has an answer for everything.

“Well,” she said, “it's not uncommon to plant other fruit trees near the vineyard so that there can be cross pollination with the flavors of the flowers that will in the long run enhance the wine.”

This sounded plausible. But fig trees?

The Chinese name for fig tree translates into English as “no flower fruit”.

Fig trees produce fruit, but they don't produce it like many other fruit trees: no flowers. Therefore, no cross pollination, no enhancing of the wine.

But there should be fruit.

Why is there a fig tree planted in the vineyard?

An Episcopal priest in Virginia with some experience planting and keeping vineyards says no one in their right mind would plant a fig tree in a vineyard. Fig trees drain off too much water from other plants: they are water hogs.

Why is there a fig tree planted in the vineyard?

Birds, I think. A fig tree in a vineyard planted by a bird, an overflying, seed-pooing bird who inadvertently planted a fig tree in a vineyard.

And the seed took root. And a fig tree grew.

And it had grown for three years, but it had produced no fruit.

And this fact was not pleasing to the owner of the vineyard.

“Cut this tree down. For three seasons it has grown here, and it has not yet produced any fruit. It's using up soil. It's taking up space. Cut it down. I'm tired of looking at it. Get rid of it.”

“But, let's give it one more season.” This is the plea of the gardener, the person who actually tends the vineyard for the person who owns it. “How about one more chance?”

“I'll pay close attention to it this season. I'll mulch it. I'll make sure it has plenty of water, plenty of manure and thereby plenty of nutrients. I'll dig around it and activate the good stuff in the soil to help it along. How about one more chance?”

“Very well,” concedes the owner of the vineyard. “One more chance. One more season. One more year.”

For about 2000 years this parable has been turned into an allegory, and that is a terrible thing to do with a parable. Parables are not allegories. But that's another sermon for another day. And, as I've mentioned before, if you want to explore this and other parables on your own, I highly commend to you Vanderbilt Divinity School Professor Amy-Jill Levine's excellent study entitled *Short Stories by Jesus*.

Y'all know, I'm betting, how this allegorical interpretation goes. The vineyard owner, allegorically speaking, is often seen to be God. The gardener, Jesus. The fig tree, us. Or the nation of Israel. Or somebody the person preaching this parable thinks is in particular need of repentance.

Well, I can tell you straight up and flat out that I'm a person who's in particular need of repentance. Every day. All the time. I am always in need of repentance. Because repentance isn't remorse. Expressing repentance, being penitential, as in our penitential rite this morning, where we frontload the confession. It isn't about feeling bad. It is about confession of where we have gotten off track and out of alignment and a commitment to amend our life, to change our ways, to get back on track, to rejoin God in God's great mission of reconciliation.

Our verb "repent" in English comes from the Hebrew *shuv*. It means to turn around, do a 180, and head in a different direction, indeed in the opposite direction.

Every year as Lent approaches I become aware of my mortality, of the ways I have gotten off track, of my need to recommit to the way of Jesus.

The ashes of Ash Wednesday express that. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Confess mortality. Express humility. Mark the beginning of a holy Lent. And so we have.

I am mortal, human, not God. I need God's gracious and able assistance. I want to walk as a child of the light. I want to follow Jesus. And I need some help to do that.

But as we think of this parable this go-round, as it comes to us this third Sunday of Lent as it does every three years, I am wondering about those allegorical approaches of old—with a twist.

What if we are the vineyard owner, or the deluded ones who think we own the vineyard? And what if the gardener is God interceding with us on behalf of the fig tree? And what if the fig tree is our life and our work and our potential and our good intentions, our gifts and graces, hopes and dreams, and relationships?

Could God be saying to us, to me, to you, "Give it one more season; give it one more year; give it one more chance. One more chance to mature, to produce fruit worthy of repentance, to do the work that is its to do."

Don't cut it down quite yet. Don't dig it up by the roots. Don't pour Round Up or some other chemicals on the stump to keep it from coming back. Give it a little more time. Think in God's time not in your time, not in our time. Let it grow a little longer.

Why?

Because this fig tree in the story has only been growing for three years. It's only been three seasons since, in my theory, a bird pooped out a seed that took root and began to grow a fig tree in the unlikeliest of places, which is, in fact, a vineyard, a place for growing grapes. Maybe the fig tree should never have been there in the first place, but it's there now. Maybe it isn't ideal, but it's real. And it's growing.

And here's another thing about fig trees. On average fig trees in temperate climates require at least four to five years to produce fruit. Four to five years, not three years. So, even if the tree is in the wrong place, it is growing as a fig tree should.

In fact, it shouldn't have produced fruit by now. It's only been three years, three seasons. It needs a little longer. It requires some patience. It requires the mentality of the faithful gardener who knows, like the Preacher of Ecclesiastes, that "to everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven."

Is the Holy Spirit whispering something to you these days about letting something do its thing, do its work *in* you, do its work *on* you, *through* you for you a little longer? One more season? One more chance to reach maturity, to come into its own?

And isn't that what our gracious God, our blessed Savior, our holy Mother Church give us every Lent? One more season. One more chance. To do our work, discern our work, walking in the way of the cross and finding it none other than the way of life and peace, our journey through the Lenten wilderness to a joyful Eastertide.

When we realize—again—that God is intervening to save us from ourselves we know the truth of the collect of this day: we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves, to save ourselves.

When we encounter the reality of the living God, there are no words, really. Wonder, awe, amazement, connection, gratitude, yes, maybe even trepidation. But not so many words.

Consider Moses whom we find this day in another scene of strangely located and just plain strange flora. In the desert, the wilderness. Watching his father-in-law's flocks.

Moses was in the place where he was supposed to be, in the place where Jethro's animals could find their food. But as he reached Horeb, the mountain of God as he would know it later in his life, suddenly an angel appeared in a flame of fire out of a bush. Non-flaming flora are to be found even in wilderness and desert places, but burning bushes are not generally found anywhere.

Why is there a burning bush in the wilderness?

To get his attention. To announce God's presence.

God had not appeared to Moses before this. But suddenly God's presence, the reality of God was undeniable. Moses had questions but not many words.

When God called him by name though, when Moses heard God's voice, he responded, "Here I am."

When Moses heard God's plan, God's mission for him, his declaration turned to a question, "Who am I?" which can be interpreted, *You want me to do what?* "Who am I to go and do this?" Moses wants to know.

You're the one I'm calling to go do this, is God's reply.

"And who are you?" Moses wants to know. Whom shall I tell your children in bondage has sent this message to them through me?

"I AM." I am. Constant and present. Not I was. Not I will be. I AM.

Constant and present, mighty to save. Discoverable in the unlikeliest of places, in the strangest of circumstances: burning bushes, misplanted fig trees.

"God comes to us disguised as our life," says Paula D'Arcy.

God comes to us disguised as our life.

And sometimes God sends us a message in a way that we can hear and see, a way that will connect with us that might not connect with or make an impression upon others, even those we love most dearly.

Moses saw a burning bush and heard a voice coming from it. It got his attention. He turned aside and had an encounter with God that changed the course of his life.

Has something unexpected captured your attention lately? Has it led you to pause and pay attention, to stop and turn aside?

Stop and listen. Receive God's message. Talk it through with the Divine. Argue if you need to. Then go do it; get going on the part of God's reconciling mission that is yours to do.

All of this—the stopping, the listening, the receiving, the talking, the arguing, the agreeing to go and do, and the going—all of this is the work of discernment. This is our work individually and together as we journey through Lent.

So, come to this table this morning, this oasis in the wilderness, this place of sacrifice and blessing, of death and life. We will experience once more together the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. And then, filled with the power that comes from beyond us that is able to save us, we will go out once more to join God's mission in the world that God so loves.