

Exodus 3: 1-15
Psalm 63: 1-8
I Corinthians 10: 1-13
Luke 13: 1-9

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St. Peter's Glenside
March 20th, 2022
Year C

Faithfulness and Fruitfulness

May the words of my mouth and the mediation of my heart, be acceptable to me, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

While reading about refugees fleeing into Poland from Ukraine, I was struck by mention of those who had decided to return after escaping to safety. An elderly man crossing the border *back* into Ukraine said it was because he worried about what would happen to his tomato garden. The simple, almost unbearable tenderness in his words resonated deeply with me.

For about ten minutes earlier this year, I thought of moving somewhere larger. It was never really serious yet I still had these fleeting thoughts. "But I won't see my tulips and daffodils bloom." Then worse, "What if the next tenant doesn't love my garden like I do?"

My garden is small. Smaller than the St. Peter's library. But after nearly 30 years in New York City where the most gardening I did was watch basil plants die a slow death on my kitchen window sill, this garden has brought me deep solace. I bought plants on sale, unsure of whether they'd make it or not, and some now are large and lush. I bought perennials thinking really? They come back? Even when they look like stick in March? Indeed they do. I still have a hard time pruning, not really convinced that cutting something way back will make it fuller. (Although I do recognize the analogy to Lent.)

This weekend I put in my first revenge pansies. Pansies can only be happy. I called them "revenge" two years ago because in face of the pandemic's first onslaught, they were insisting on beauty, life, and hope. So was I. I stabbed into the wet ground then, as I did on Saturday, with a fierceness that was far more than necessary.

But today's gospel is about much more than gardening. We cannot skip over the gruesome violence that precedes it.

Remember that Jesus' disciples were Galileans. Just like the pilgrims worshipping in the temple who were slaughtered by Pontius Pilate, their blood merging with the blood of the sacrificed animals. But Jesus didn't stop there. He went on and told the story of eighteen innocent bystanders, dead in a flash when a tower collapsed on them. The disciples' questions to Jesus, are then the questions humans have asked across the millennium.

“Why?” Jesus, the disciples ask. “Why suffering, why evil, why random death?” Instead of an answer, they get a story. About a fig tree. Can’t you hear them muttering? “Not another damn parable.” But yes.

Jesus did not blame the victims. It was not their fault, not part of God’s plan. In no way did he Jesus say that this was what God intended for their lives or that he needed “more angels in heaven” or that they were “too good for this life” which I often hear in the hospital.

You can almost hear Jesus laughing when someone inevitably says after a catastrophe, “Well, I guess God was looking out for me. It wasn’t my time.”

What Jesus is saying is that the time is now, to repent. To turn back, and live life in a different way. This is not a free pass. It’s doesn’t put you into the happily-ever-after column. No, it just liberates us all to live our lives to the fullest while we have them because towers will fall, tanks will charge across borders, pandemics will rage and sooner or our bodies will prove fallible.

“The fig tree gets a stay of execution,” writes UCC pastor Richard Floyd, who says that God is looking for not only our faithfulness, but our fruitfulness, and this takes work. Floyd continues:

The gardener doesn’t create the fig tree or the soil it’s in, or the sun that shines on it, or the water that nourishes it. God gives us all those things. But the ongoing effort to make the most of what God gives us will be what produces good fruit.

We are then, to make the most of what we have. The fig tree is not expected to produce pineapples or bananas Floyd says. We all have our gifts and we bring them to fruition by tapping more deeply in our lives to the source of life.

I can imagine that elderly man in Ukraine knowing that he, too, was rooted to the source of his life through his tomato garden. I imagine an old man, the earth, the sun, the endless watering and weeding, and the ripe sweet tomatoes he gave to his neighbors and friends. If someone said “There are tomatoes in Poland,” he’d shake his head without the words to say it’s not the same.

We are all gardeners in this life, tending something we call our own. And if we’re honest, throughout our lives we’re each of the characters in this parable: Debie Thomas poses these questions in her Journey with Jesus essay on this text:

- In what ways am I like the absentee landowner, standing apart from where life and death actually happen? How am I refusing to get my hands dirty, wallowing in futility and despair?
- In what ways am I like the fig tree? Un-nourished, Unable or unwilling to nourish others? What kinds of tending would it take to bring me back to life.

- In what ways am I like the gardener? Where in my life am I willing to accept Jesus' invitation to go elbow-deep into the muck and manure? How willing am I to pour hope into a project I can't control?

Good questions for Lent and for the rest of our lives. The world is on the brink, of what, we do not know. Jesus blew past the disciples' questions of "Why?" That surely hasn't stopped us from asking them, because that's what a human heart does. Just know, as the disciples learned that those questions won't carry you very far.

We don't even know if that fig tree ever bore fruit, got hacked down a year later, or if the whole orchard was killed by a drought.

We are called to repent—to turn and look another way. And, I believe to act. Dig around in the muck of this life.

"Why do terrible things happen in this world?" writes Debie Thomas. Instead of trying to answer that she suggests:

Go weep with someone who's weeping. Go fight for the justice you long to see. Go confront evil where it needs confronting. Go learn the art of patient hope-filled tending. Go cultivate beautiful things.

Like that tomato garden in the Ukraine which may already be a bomb crater. But it was where someone knew he belonged, and tapped into the roots of his life, whatever they may be.

Fruitfulness and faithfulness; an anonymous refugee reminds us that they are everything in the eyes of God. They may not be able to defeat death—none of us can—but they affirm the way of life, of light, and hope. AMEN