

Lent 3 C
March 11, 2007

Ps. 103.1-11
Exodus 3.1-15
1 Corinthians 10.1-13
Luke 13.1-9

The wonderful reading of Exodus chapter 3: 1-15 is one of my more favorite passages of the Bible, and very well sets the groundwork, sets the foundation, for the passages from Paul's letter and the Gospel of Luke that followed. For those who may remember my homily on New Year's Eve Sunday morning entitled, "Christ's most Holy Name," you will recall the fondness I have for Exodus 3:13, 14, and 15.

I invite you to open a pew bible to page 49, to chapter 3, and, in the lower right hand corner, to verses 13, 14, and 15. I invite you to read these three verses with me; verses 13, 14, and 15:

3:13 But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"

14 God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'

15 God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations."

"I AM..." Being so named means that Yahweh God is eternally self-existent. As created creatures, we have a beginning and an end. We are, in a sense, time sensitive material. For us, time forms a set of book ends, a beginning and an end. Not so with Yahweh God. Timeless... No book ends as parameters. Yahweh God... always present time.

Verse 15 validates the timelessness of Yahweh God. "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to

you.” We ourselves validate this very verse each time we pray the Gloria: “Glory to the Father and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as (what?) it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen. By so saying, we acknowledge the timelessness of Yahweh God.

Right from the top of the 10th chapter of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, he writes and makes reference to the timelessness of Yahweh God:

I do want you to be aware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea,

“That our ancestors were under the cloud...” The cloud referenced here is the Shekhina, “the glory of the Lord,” the same glory of the Lord that led the Israelites through the Red Sea and remained with them through the Sinai wilderness.

Paul authenticates that the same God about whom he preaches is the same God who brought the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt. And the things that happened to them, the sins committed, were written for our learning, **and continue** to be valid to the end of the ages, to the second coming of Christ. God’s Word has not changed, is not changed, and will not change. God’s Word remains in effect - **as written** - until Christ returns at the second coming.

The just read Gospel passage from Luke offers enough sermon material for at least a month of Sunday sermons. I’ll be kind and spare you the trauma of sitting here for that length of time. However, Jesus’ parable of the fig tree and its implication for us and the historical context in which we find ourselves begs our attention. Keep in mind that the Lord God who tells this story is the same Lord of the Old Testament, the “I AM.”

I invite you to turn in a pew Bible to page 950, to Luke, chapter 13, and to verse 6, titled, “The parable of the Barren Fig Tree.” I invite you to read with me verses 6-9:

6 Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none.

7 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 the soil?'

8 He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.

9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."

Jesus is teaching "accountability," teaching that we are being held answerable for how we measure up to His expectations.

Verse 6 reads in part: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard..." From Isaiah, 5:1-7, we learn that the Vineyard of the Lord is the House of Israel, God's chosen people. Vineyard – a very special place; a place where the soil is well prepared and cared for. It is not some neglected wasteland. In other words, it is "Blessed!" This vineyard is under divine care, a recipient of Yahweh's promises.

As fig trees are prolific fruit bearing trees, the owner of the vineyard, Yahweh God, came looking for fruit on this fig tree, but found none, found nadda, zero, zilch.

You see, God has expectations, expectations of us, for we are today's fig tree planted in Yahweh's vineyard. And the fruit we are expected to bear:

- fruit of the heart – which is expressed as love;
- fruit of the lips through worship, praise and proclamation;
- fruit of talents and their use to proclaim God's kingdom;
- fruit to be more holy;
- fruit to be more wise; and
- fruit to be more obedient than those surrounding us. This fruit of obedience is required and expected of everyone blessed with knowing the Word of God.

If we profess to be God's own, then His own ought to manifest the fruit of our relationship with Him. But, in our story, God's expectation of His planting was not met.

First re-action of the owner of the vineyard? "Cut it down!" he said to the gardener, who may be interpreted as being the vineyard owner's

Son, Jesus. However, it is His Son who provides a second chance; who accepts the responsibility of nurturing and fertilizing the tree, and who gives a second chance to show growth. Jesus is our intercessor. He came to nurture, cultivate, and fertilize us so that we may be effective witnesses for Him. Jesus pleads with the Father to give us a second chance. We, through God's mercy, are given, not only just a second, but often a third or more opportunities to show growth in our walk with the Lord.

But contrary to many opinions, God's mercy is not timeless in endurance. As the fig tree was given one more year to bear fruit or be cut down, we, through repentance of our sins, are given more than one opportunity to turn from our sinful ways and be fruitful in our witness to Jesus Christ. What we profess as Christians is to bear fruit that leads others to Christ. No fruit; no mercy given; no forgiveness received.

If this finds you squirming in your seats, I understand. You see, such a teaching forbids us from sitting here week after week in our comfortable pews, praying the confession, and yet, week after week, show no observable fruit of repentance that grows out of God's mercy and forgiveness.

Jesus is looking for fruit of his mercy, looking for the fruit of our forgiveness. The fruit God is looking for? ...The bringing of others to our Lord Jesus Christ, so that they, too, may have eternal life. In a very real sense, the salvation of others is, indeed, in our hands.

Proclaiming the Kingdom is what and who we are about as believers. As said in the Eucharistic Prayer: "We proclaim his resurrection!" Do you? Can you remember the last time you did just that? And if you have to think about it, well ...I've made my point.

It is one thing to seek God's forgiveness and mercy through repentance. But repentance without bearing fruit of that repentance – as evidenced by our manner of life - is unacceptable by our Lord. True repentance, opens our hearts to God's digging and fertilization. Our hearts are opened through study of His Word, through the

sacraments, and through worship. However, if that effort bears no fruit...

Think about it for a moment. A fig tree... planted in a vineyard. A vineyard - a normal place to find a fig tree? I not believe it is natural expectation to find fig trees in vineyards. Thus the fig tree of our story is not planted by accident; God himself planted this tree. It is not a wild or an uncultivated tree. Therefore, something more is expected; fruit, much fruit; fruit born out of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

God himself planted you and I here in this vineyard of St. Bartholomew's. We are not here by accident. We are planted here to bear fruit. Did you notice that the owner of the vineyard – Yahweh God – is not an absentee Landlord, but comes time and again, observing the growth of his investment. None watch with such a scrutinizing eye as God.

We cannot be like the barren fig tree in our story. We cannot take life and nourishment from the vineyard's soil and not bear fruit to the one who gives life. God is patient, long-suffering, merciful. However, unfruitfulness is exceedingly provoking to the Most High God. Such unfruitfulness reveals a contempt for God's divine goodness, as well as a complete disregard for our souls and eternity. Lack of fruit is an abuse of God's patience and takes up space better used by others.

God will take His Spirit away from that which does not bear fruit and plant His Spirit on that which will. Are we not seeing this happening today? Are we not seeing today the occurrence of the Holy Spirit being removed from our disobedient National Church and placed upon those who proclaim that Jesus is Lord and that his Word is true! Has God's patience been truly tested? Have not the Primates stated, "Repent or be cut down!"

My brothers and sisters, through this parable, Jesus calls upon us to examine ourselves and ask, "Are we fruitful or barren?" Jesus calls us to be thankful for His forgiveness and mercy. Jesus calls us to be thankful for our spiritual healing. We ought not to presume, that is take for granted, God's mercy.

We often have heard, “Much is required to whom much is given.” Much has been given to us. We are truly blessed. The congregation of St. Bartholomew’s is planted here for a purpose. I was planted here for a purpose. So were you. We are to bear fruit, fruit that proclaims the kingdom as it is proclaimed in scripture; to bear fruit that glorifies God through His son, Jesus Christ. As ambassadors for Christ, we are expected to bring others to Jesus to know Him, to love Him, to be forgiven by Him, and receive eternal life.

Ingratitude is a form of idolatry. Seeking other rewards, forsaking the good bestowed upon us by God, is a form of idolatry. Many of us use the excuse that we are so busy with the responsibilities of jobs and families, that we are too busy to respond to God’s call, that we are too busy to respond to His call to work in the vineyard; too busy to bear fruit.

I submit to you the word *busy* is an acronym:

B – *Being*
U – *under*
S – *Satan’s*
Y – *yoke.*

When we are too *busy* with earthly things to do godly things, then are we busy *Being under Satan’s yoke?*

God’s kingdom, God’s salvation, although full of love and grace, is not an entitlement program. Being too busy doing worldly things is not an acceptable excuse. We must strive, we must come forward, we must step out in faith, we must stand firm and show the fruits of our faith. As the fig tree in our story received a second chance to bear fruit, so also have we a second chance, by repentance and amendment of life, to throw off Satan’s yoke and be fruitful for the Lord. But don’t wait too long, for our story also reveals that God’s patience does have its limits.

From Galatians 6:10: “So then, as we have opportunity (*as we have time*), let us do good to all men, and especially to those of the household of faith.”

And the people of God said, “**Amen!**”