

## Sermon for March 7, 2010 The Rev. Marguerite Alley

Wow! What a great set of lessons! There is so much here for us it would be impossible to touch on everything in just one little 10 minute sermon. From the Hebrew scripture we hear the story of the call of Moses. There are all kinds of gems of wisdom for us in that story: from listen and pay attention, to you can do things you never dreamed you could if you just trust God.....with a whole host of other subjects in between. Fear, insecurity, power, courage, trust and probably a few I've not found.

The Epistle is even more challenging for us. And I must say this reading, causes me more than a little heartburn. We are told first that although all the Israelites followed Moses and "did what they were told", still God was not pleased with most of them and they were struck down in the wilderness. Then we are told that these things occurred as examples to us. This is a very difficult thing for us to hear...but we'll come back to it in a minute.

Finally, the Gospel is even more ripe with fruit for us as Jesus first tries to freak out his audience by mentioning this story about Pilate mingling the blood of some Galileans with sacrificial blood on the altar and asking if they think that because this awful thing happened to these people, does it mean they are more filled with sin than anyone else. He uses the Tower of Siloam to ask the same question. We could just as easily ask the question right now.....because of what happened to the people of Haiti and Chile, are they more sinful than we are? Then Jesus says...."No, they are not, but if you don't repent, the same thing could happen to you. So.....he says no, they aren't more sinful, and then he says we are just as sinful and the same thing could happen here, AND this thing happened BECAUSE we are sin-filled? Now that is some pretty scary stuff. This could be a great place for a sermon on why bad things happen to good people except someone already did that. Then he follows that with a story which seems to contradict all of this.....the vinedresser begs the owner of the vineyard not to cut down the fruitless fig tree...but to allow him to fertilize it more and see if he can coax figs out of it the next year. We could take that to mean some trees need more time to produce fruit (we need to mature a bit before we are ready) or that some trees require a different kind of fertilizer (maybe a case for different denominations? Or maybe it is just a statement that there is a little "fertilizer" in every denomination). We could also take it to mean that we have 1 season to produce some evidence in our lives of our relationship with God....and if we don't, well, we're going to be cut down. At the end of the story, Jesus has the vinedresser say something that really captured my attention when I read it: The vinedresser says "**Sir, let it alone for one more year, while 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.**" Now the translations differ on that last sentence and to me it makes a difference. NRSV says as you heard "You can cut it down". New English says "You shall have it down", and King James says "Thou shalt cut it down". The NRSV suggests the vinedresser will also "give up" and give the owner "permission" if you will to cut it down. But...he(the vinedresser) will not cut it down himself. New English takes the middle road and doesn't suggest how the cutting down will occur, only that it will take place. King James clearly says "You (Thou) shall cut it down", again making it clear that it will not be the vinedresser who makes the decision, but the owner. The KJV also suggests by the language chosen that it will happen....not that it could happen as suggested by "you can cut it down".

So.....what sense can we make of this? What can we take away with us today? I would suggest that how we interpret this is a direct reflection on our human frailty and fault.

When disaster strikes, or we are faced life threatening illness, our first reaction is wonder what we did wrong. We analyze our actions, our lives, even our diets in an effort to explain why this terrible thing is happening to us. I remember thinking as I lay in the worst pain I have ever experienced "But I drink 48 ounces of water everyday. How can this be happening to me again"? I think I may have also promised to join a convent, give away all my possessions and spend the rest of my life caring for the poor...in exchange for a break from the pain. We search for an explanation as to why this suffering has occurred in hopes of figuring out how we can keep it from happening again. When that explanation eludes us, we then begin to bargain with God...who must be causing this pain because we aren't good enough....for whatever reason. But what this also tells me is **that I am usually less interested in the real reason for my suffering, than I am in avoiding the suffering itself.** I suspect this may be because what I desire above all is a **sense of control** over the disasters that happen in my life. I DO NOT want to hear that bad stuff happens kind of randomly. Or even that some people are genetically pre-disposed to certain illnesses, or that the earth is in

constant movement and that sometimes causes earthquakes. I don't want to hear that someone was in the wrong place at the wrong time because they spilled their coffee, were 10 minutes late leaving home and thus they were in the intersection when the tractor trailer's brakes failed.

Now some folks might interpret this message in a somewhat less convoluted way than I do. They might think that the most obvious explanation might be: Bad things don't happen to good people. They only happen to bad people. When they do happen, they happen so everyone can see...and learn from it. And it proves that God follows our natural laws in the sense that for every action there is an equal reaction. I have not found any of that to be particularly helpful, inspiring or true. I find it very difficult to believe in a God who makes bad things happen to people to teach them a lesson. I also have a hard time with the idea that as Paul suggests, God tests us to see how faithful we are or how much we love God. I suspect that it is the word "Test" that bothers me most because it suggests that somehow it was devised so that we can fail. I do believe that as humans we are faced with multiple decisions each day and that we are capable of choosing the right thing to do. I am also aware that we often choose to do the wrong thing....either out of fear, out of convenience, or out of anger. But there is no doubt in my mind that God loves us despite our bad choices, despite our ungrounded fear, and despite our seeming inability to trust. What I come away with though is the sense that Jesus is aware of what we fear most. So while through this story, he never suggests that we can control what happens to us, either through being extra good, or by bargaining with God, he does seem to understand **that our fear of not being in control has made us particularly susceptible to thinking that we can control what happens to us.**

Now if we look at this story of the Fig Tree and ascribe roles to the characters, then surely God is the owner and Jesus is the vinedresser and we are that poor fruitless fig tree. If we are accurate here then I am not sure what it says about God the Father...that if we don't bear fruit we will be cut down...but it does say something interesting about God the Son. Jesus said "I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world". Jesus will never be the one who "cuts us down" and will never go back on his word to be our advocate. We live, like the fig tree, by grace and forgiveness. But **we** think that we have somehow earned this grace and forgiveness. We think that salvation is essentially an "atta boy" from God for our goodness. Or if we aren't good, the fact that we know it and say that we want to be better, then salvation is God saying, OK, I will give you one more season. **The truth though is that we have not earned anything, and salvation is not a stamp of approval nor a dispensation.** The fact, at least for me is that Jesus, the vinedresser felt so strongly that we could bear fruit if we have more time, that he offered himself.....can I even say this? as fertilizer. For me, the truth is that by his teaching and his sacrifice we are fed....our roots grow stronger, we grow taller towards the sun....and eventually we bloom and bear fruit. Jesus did not come to be a policeman. He came to show us our arrogance in believing that we can control the wildness of creation. He came to remind us that we can't control our actions when they are born of fear, except by not being so afraid. He did not come to see if we are sorry for our mistakes, our arrogance or our lack of faith. He knows we will do or say just about anything to avoid suffering, pain and punishment. Jesus is not a scorekeeper. Each season we don't produce fruit, he suggests we need just one more. Jesus came only to forgive. Free of charge, no strings attached, no explanation. It is hard to accept because we can't control it. It doesn't mean we can do anything we want. It doesn't mean we can stop trying to be all that God intends us to be. It means we can stop trying to control things we can't control. It means we can stop worrying about what we have to do to earn God's love and start living with that love. So in this time of preparation, as we make our way towards Jerusalem, lets remember that it is the vinedresser who goes to the cross for us. It is the one who forgives us that also feeds and restores us. All we have to do is to be open, courageous and like Moses, willing to turn aside from our daily lives and listen. Perhaps then we can grow into the full stature of Christ and bear fruit.