Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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“Leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it …” (Luke 13:9).

Third Sunday of Lent

Ex 3:1-8a, 13-15; Ps 103; 1 Cor 10:1-6, 10-12; Lk 13:1-9

Today’s readings for the Third Sunday of Lent can be read as calls to discipleship and conversion. Moses is called from the burning bush to lead the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt. The parable of the fig tree encourages us to let God work with us to make us more fruitful. In both stories, God chooses unlikely subjects to serve the divine purpose.

Moses was a runaway murderer. The last place in the world he planned to return to was Egypt, much less to confront Pharaoh over the fate of slaves. Yet the voice from the fiery bush on Mount Horeb proposes to send him to guide the Hebrews to freedom. The fire filling the bush without consuming it is God's compassion for the suffering of Moses' enslaved brothers and sisters. That fire is beginning to move within Moses' own heart. He is transfixed by the holiness of the place and the moment.

When Moses learns that the voice belongs to none other than the God of his ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he accedes to his destiny in salvation history despite his fears and deep sense of inadequacy. The mysterious name of this summoning God is I AM, timeless Being itself, the Lord of all. Thus is set in motion the Exodus, the founding event of the life of Israel.

The drama of the call of Moses may seem far away from the fate of a single fig tree, but the same divine compassion is at work in cultivating its destiny within God's larger plans. The tree has produced nothing in three years. It is furthermore taking up valuable soil another tree might thrive in. It is like the one lost sheep in a flock of one hundred, not worth risking time and effort to rescue.

But the gardener sees potential in that reluctant, fruitless tree, and he asks the owner for one more chance to nurture it before cutting it down. Of all the nations of the earth, the Lord of the Universe bent down to hear the cry of a cursed people drawn to Egypt by famine, saved by Joseph, betrayed son of Jacob, serving as pharaoh's chancellor, only to be enslaved again and attacked for being too fruitful.

The great themes of salvation are rooted in the Exodus, God's unlikely love for Abraham and his children, reaching into history to save them again and again. The tendrils of God's first act of mercy reappear in the patient gardener in Jesus' parable. The promise is too potent to let it fail, even when sin and resistance are factors. One more chance.

Most of us will never know God in a burning bush. But we can feel the fire of divine love urging us not to give up when our lives feel unproductive and infertile.

The gardener exposes our roots, using our own decay and failure to fertilize us back to life. The Word of mercy stirs our imaginations with parables and metaphors that recruit us to try again. This is what it means to be a disciple. Take off your shoes and feel the bare ground, then move closer to the fire for the next lesson.

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