

Holy God, “your loving-kindness is better than life itself; my lips shall give you praise.” I speak to you in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. *Amen.*

“A story is told of a farmer who lay on his deathbed despairing over the fate of his lazy sons. Near his final hour, an inspiration came to him. He called his sons around his bedside as close as they could get. ‘I am soon to leave this world, my sons,’ he whispered. ‘I want you to know that I have left a treasure of gold for you. I have hidden it in my field. Dig carefully and well and you shall find it. I ask only that you share it among yourselves evenly.’ The sons begged him to tell them *exactly* where he had buried the treasure but the father breathed his last breath and spoke no more.

“As soon as their father was buried, the sons took up their pitchforks and shovels and began to turn over the soil in their father’s field. They dug and dug until they had turned over the whole field—twice. They found no treasure. But they decided that since the field was so well dug up they might as well plant some grain as their father had done before them.

“The crop grew well for them. After the harvest they decided to dig again in hopes of finding the buried treasure. Again they found not a treasure, but a field prepared for sowing. This year’s crop was better than the last. This went on for a number of years until the sons had grown accustomed to the cycles of the seasons and the rewards of daily labor. In spite of their unrealistic expectations, based on their father’s lie to them, they had done the right thing, using what was left to them in the most efficient manner.

“By that time their farming had earned them each enough money to live a happy life. It was then that the sons came to the realization of the true nature of the ‘treasure’ their father had left for them. It wasn’t what they had expected or hoped for, but it had its rewards.”<sup>1</sup>

Such are the stories we hear in scripture, and today’s lessons are full of treasures for us to hear and ponder: God’s call to Moses through a bush that was blazing, but not consumed; Jesus’ parable of the unproductive fig tree, and in between, Paul’s gentle words of warning to the early church at Corinth. Paul’s words in the last two verses of this passage from his First Letter to the Corinthians are timeless for us Christ followers. Calling them to remember the history of their ancestors, he says to them: “So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.”

In today’s Gospel, we have two scenarios, two teachings that appear to be very different about situations that are very different. First we hear Jesus’ followers telling him about the Galileans who were slaughtered by Pilate’s soldiers as they offered sacrifices to God. We might call them martyrs because they died while practicing their faith. Some who profess to be followers of Christ in our day would try to put the spin of divine judgment on them; we’ve seen that far too often in recent years. But Jesus doesn’t do that. He responds by asking if their suffering happened because they were worse sinners than anyone else, and then he names those who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them, people we would call victims of an unfortunate accident. “Do you think that they were more guilty of wrongdoing than everyone else who lives in Jerusalem?” he asks.

Jesus, who knows the hearts and minds of all who love him, seems to think his followers are making the jump from sin to judgment to untimely death. But that is not the point he wants to make. “No, I tell you” he says, “but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as

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<sup>1</sup> Synthesis, Lent 3 – Year C, “Postscript,” March 7, 2010.

they did.” He wants his followers to realize that they—we—who are still alive have an opportunity to change *before* we die. The ones who died unexpectedly did not have that chance to change.

Jesus illustrates his point with the straightforward story of the unfruitful fig tree, and its message is pretty easy to interpret. If we imagine that the fig tree has ears to hear, we can also imagine that the tree hears the plea of the gardener for one more year, one more chance, for “the tree” to change, to act, to do something to save its own life. Many of us can connect this parable quite literally to our own experience of planting something that just refused to thrive. Like so many of Jesus’ parables, we don’t hear the rest of the story, so we don’t know what happens at the end of that year. Perhaps that is so we can have the opportunity to translate and interpret the roles of the fig tree, the gardener and the vineyard owner as the Spirit guides us to understand them. I imagine that all of us have experienced each of those roles personally, not only in the garden, but in our lives.

Nadia Bolz Weber, a Lutheran pastor and contemporary theologian who speaks the truth of the Gospel in a direct, unorthodox way, says that she preaches for herself. That’s true of most of us who stand in the pulpit. So, I’ll share with you that Paul’s words about God’s faithfulness and God’s provision for our endurance are comforting and hopeful for me today. So also is the Gospel. It’s not a warning about judgment, but instead an image of a door opening to opportunity, a reminder that in every day of my life and in every circumstance of my life I can respond and change in a way that is pleasing to God and will draw me closer to Jesus. That’s what repentance is—change that comes not from judgment but from a love for Christ and a desire to please God.

Another story: “There was a blacksmith who worked incredibly hard at his trade all his life. But finally the day came for him to die. The angel of death was sent to him, and much to the angel’s surprise, the man refused to go. The blacksmith pleaded with the angel to make his case before God, arguing that he was the only blacksmith in the village, and it was time for all his neighbors to begin their planting and sowing. He was needed.

“So the angel pleaded his case before God, saying that the man didn’t want to appear ungrateful, and that he was glad to have a place in the Kingdom awaiting for him—but couldn’t he put off coming for a while? And so the blacksmith was given more time.

“About a year or two later the angel came back again with the same message: the Lord was ready to share the fullness of the Kingdom with the faithful blacksmith. Again the diligent man had reservations about going, and said: ‘A neighbor of mine is seriously ill, and it’s time for harvest. A number of us are trying to save his crops so that his family won’t become destitute. Please come back later.’ And off the angel went again.

“Well, this became a pattern. Every time the angel came, the blacksmith had one excuse or another. He would just shake his head and tell the angel how he was still needed, and then decline. Finally, the blacksmith grew so old and frail that even he had to admit to himself that he was weary and perhaps ready now to go. And so he prayed: ‘God, if you’d like to send your angel to me again, I’d be glad to go home now.’ Immediately the angel appeared—as though the emissary had been already there and listening, although invisible. The blacksmith acknowledged the holy presence and said, ‘If you still want to take me home, I’m ready now to live forever in the Kingdom of heaven.’ The angel laughed and looked with heavenly delight at the saintly blacksmith. “Where,” the angel asked, “do you think you’ve been all these years? Where, if not already home?”<sup>2</sup>

And where are we, if not already home? May we each day bear the fruit of God’s heavenly kingdom. *Amen.*

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<sup>2</sup> Synthesis, Lent 3 – Year C, “Postscript,” March 3, 2013.