



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Under the Fig Tree

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 20, 2022

The Third Sunday in Lent

Based on Exodus 3:1-15; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

Oh God, unsettle us with your blazing presence. Move us beyond our fears. Light our way. Meet us here. For your love's sake. Amen.

As they continue their journey towards Jerusalem, towards the temple, towards the cross and tomb, Jesus and his friends learn some gruesome and disturbing news. The emperor Pilate, head of the occupying Roman military, has not only executed a group of presumably Jewish Galileans but literally mingled their blood with that of their animal sacrifices at the temple. This is shocking and concerning for the disciples and for Jesus—also Galileans, also Jews. Looking for answers and perhaps reassurance, they turn to Jesus to comment on the latest headlines. True to form, Jesus doesn't give any easy answers but rather shifts the focus. Were these Galileans any worse sinners? NO! And, invoking another recent accidental tragedy, were those who died in the collapse of the tower of Siloam any worse sinners? NO!

In one fell swoop Jesus debunks a host of popular theologies still prevalent today and singularly encapsulated in the title of Kate Bowler's book, *Everything Happens for a Reason: and Other Lies I've Loved*. Lies represented by platitudes such as only the good die young and God helps those who help themselves. Lies that unravel as devastatingly insufficient in real life and real time. You can almost simply replace Pilate with Putin and ask the same question of one who has mingled the blood of Ukrainians and the religion of Jesus with perverted political agendas, just this past week quoting scripture to justify his diabolic war. As Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us, Jesus himself was not brought down by atheism and anarchy. He was brought down by law and order allied with religion, which is always a deadly mix. Were those Ukrainian civilians, including children, killed in the bombing of a school and community center this week worse sinners than any other? Lord have mercy, no. God, no.

Jesus doesn't give easy answers to the age-old questions. The questions asked by Moses and Job and us: Why do humans suffer? Why does evil exist? Why does injustice persist? He does, in light of this great mystery, point them right back to the inevitable and inescapable reality of Ash Wednesday—that we all die. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. "Therefore, I tell you, unless you repent, you will all perish as they did"—which is to say, as our traditional prayers reminds us, "suddenly and unprepared."

I was terrified what he would think—my grandfather, Charles, from whom I take my middle name—when he found out I was marrying a man, Michael. He was born in 1924 and a pretty traditional guy. To be honest, I never imagined he would live to see me get married. And he almost didn't. A few months before our wedding in 2018, he was hospitalized for several days and thought he might die then. It was in that moment that my mother impulsively told him. He didn't say much when he first

heard, but after his release from the hospital, he called several days later to say, “Well I hear wedding bells are ringing.” He came to the wedding, drank mimosas, danced his heart out, and died 6 months later at age 94. I’m so grateful for him and for my mother in her courage to advocate for me—her courage to let the truth be known.

I cannot stand to imagine what joy I would have missed out on. A good and honest man, at 94—far from sudden and unprepared, he was probably about as ready as one could possibly be to die. But was I? See, this is a story about repentance—as much for me as for him.

Repentance simply means to turn, to change one’s mind, to go a different direction. But it has so much baggage. We’ve all seen street preachers with signs saying some version of turn or burn. And, beloved, it’s true: Turn or burn in the hell of one’s own making on earth. In the fires of turmoil fed by the fuel of regret. Repentance is the antidote for regret and the harbinger of joy. In a world where it’s so much easier to retreat to the familiar and the easy and the mindless, we need a booster shot of repentance every day. Not to immunize ourselves from the sting of death, but because death is inevitable.

But, see, the call to repentance is good news. It’s an opportunity, a gift. It means we’re still alive. Time’s not up yet. Whether you’re 9 or 94, it’s not too late. And it means that in a world where so much chaos and confusion and craziness happen that is out of our control, we still have some degree of agency and power as children of God. We never have all the choices, but always have choices. We can’t do everything, but we can do something.

So Jesus starts talkin’ about this fig tree. In the other Gospels you might remember, he curses the fig tree. But in this one he just tells a story about a profit-conscious landowner and a fig tree that just won’t produce. The landowner is ready to cut it down, save for a gardener and advocate who says *wait one more year*.

Faithful reading of the parables avoids viewing them as simple allegories, with each character symbolizing a definite corresponding entity. Such interpretations are usually devised to press a singular agenda. Rather, Jesus taught in parables to keep us asking hard questions and to open up an imaginative environment in which to consider ourselves and the divine from multiple perspectives, such that the Spirit might speak.

Of course, like so many images in the Bible, the fig tree itself alludes to an entire history of Biblical discourse. According to the Prophet Micah’s vision, as quoted by Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman in her poem, “The Hill We Climb,” “everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree and no one shall make them afraid.” When our friend Bartholomew, also translated as Nathaniel, first heard of Jesus he said, “Can anything good possibly come out of Nazareth?” When he finally met Jesus, he encountered one who already knew him. “How do you know me?” he asked. Jesus answered, “I saw you under that fig tree over there.” Siri and Alexa got nothing on this Jesus.

Some scholars think that tree in the garden of Eden might have been a fig tree. It never actually says it was an apple tree. But when the man and the woman first realize they’re naked, they covered themselves with fig leaves, for they were ashamed.

But, see, God already knows the *truth*. *Jesus is the Truth*. God knows what’s behind the fig leaf. Behind the masks. Under our feet. Moses, take off your shoes, for this is holy ground. With God there is no shame, no fear, only love.

It's easy to point the finger at everything wrong in the world and all the ways our human family resembles nothing of the prophet's vision of a kingdom of justice and peace and equality. It's even easier to become complacent with our own personal status quo of the heart.

It's much more uncomfortable to get our hands dirty and to get intimately involved with the smelly, pungent odor of the sometimes-unpleasant truths of our lives and our world. But God knows the truth. God can even use the truth to bear the fruit of the kingdom. The God who brings forth alleluias from the ashes and shouts of joy from tears of sorrow has established creation so to use animal excrement to bring forth fruit. A trench of manure becomes holy ground.

My friends, as long as we have breath, it's never too late to repent—to turn, to change your mind, to make a new start in response to the truth when it is revealed. Repentance feels risky. It feels vulnerable. It feels scary. It demands honesty, and it asks us to let go of things we've allowed to shape our identity. Who will I be if I let go of my anger, my addiction, my privilege, my power? Who will I be if I come out from behind my fig leaf and stand in the truth. Take my shoes off. Let my hair down.

We belong to the great I AM. We are loved. We are enough. With THAT confidence we can act and respond to the hard truths in society right now.

In the face of the war in Ukraine, will we face the truth of how our own country has perpetuated war and violence the past? Will we acknowledge the biased immigration policies in places across the Western world?

In light of the truth of climate change, will we have the courage to sacrifice our own comfort and customs for the common good?

In the face of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation affecting schools across the country, will we testify to the truth that every human being of every gender identity, expression, and sexual orientation is made in the image of God and worthy of dignity and respect?

What about in your life? What is the fig tree in your life? The thing taking up space in your heart and mind and not bearing any fruit? There's somebody today who's at the end of the rope in a relationship, a job, a situation with a child or parent. Somebody today is ready to give up, and you need to hear this word: Don't give up. Give it one more week. One more month. One more year.

Somebody else, like the landowner, has given it long enough and it's time to call time. Enough to the neglect, the abuse, the cover up.

Somebody else is like the fig tree. And maybe it's time for a transplant to more fertile soil in order to flourish.

I don't know where you find yourself in this story today. But don't wait. Make the call. Do the thing. Make the change. Today. While there's still time. Get in the trenches, get your hands dirty, and know that the God of the manger gets in the manure with us.

We can hide behind our fig leaves and cover up the stench of the truth with candles and perfume. Or we can do the work and bear the fruit that lasts.

Beloved, one day wedding bells will ring for the very union of heaven and earth. One day we will go home to God, and we will see our Lord face to face. But God already sees us and knows us and loves

us. With all our muck and manure. So let's not wait. Let us turn. Let us labor. Let us love the hell out of this world. And watch our fig trees bloom.

You won't regret it.

Amen.

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