

For the people of St. Philip's

Lent 3 Year C

March 7, 2010

Luke 13:1-9

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One of the things I've enjoyed about this winter has been looking at the architecture ...of trees. I've been noticing the black branches of trees spread across a Carolina Blue sky in an intricate filigree....or black branches heavy laden with linear mounds of snow...I've watched the snow fall wondering how much heaviness those trees could bear.

Those bare branches of trees, arching out in ever-smaller lines, have been taking a beating this winter. I know up in these hills around us, the supporting limbs of many trees have been broken. Folks will long remember the sound of trees breaking from the weight of heavy snow. It was like guns going off, only the fallen were the trees. Now , the pruned branches are scattered everywhere. One can see the yellow scars of bared wood, stripped of the protective black bark as it has been torn from its levered position. It's been such a long snowy winter it's hard to imagine that spring-time and green leaves are going to return and soften the stark landscape to which we've grown accustomed. It's

been a long winter.

But, it's March now. I saw crocuses in bloom this week. The forcythia buds are forming, the jonquils are shooting up out of the snow banks. We're approaching that amazing time of the year when pale flowers bud and blossom on some of those stark tree branches. I'll never forget the time I was walking out in a meadow south of town and witnessed an amazing sight. A large old flowering cherry tree was in full bloom. No leaves yet, just pink blossoms and bare black branches. I stopped to look at it around noon. The bright sun was directly overhead and it caused the shadow of the branches directly overhead to be cast directly below in a circle around the tree. As I stood there and looked at the ground around the tree it seemed that the shadows on the ground of the overhanging branches had become the dark roots of the tree and the ground had disappeared. Suddenly it seemed that I could see the entire tree, from the roots to the trunk to the branches. I marveled at its immenseness and in that moment at noon, I realized that I only ever seen half of the tree, there is a vast root system below which largely remains unseen.

People in Biblical times loved trees too. Fig trees could grow tall and

leafy and become shade trees too. People could get out of the hot sun and rest and relax in the shade of their fig tree. In Biblical times, the Israelites not only loved fig trees because of the shade, they also loved to eat figs. Figs, like grapes and pomegranates, were delicious, delectable, delightful and mouth watering to the taste. Imagine sitting in the dense shade and eating a juicy fig. Heaven.

This leads to our gospel story for today. According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus was traveling from Galilee up north to Jerusalem down south. It was an eighty-mile journey.

While on that journey to Jerusalem, some unnamed people came up to Jesus and told him about two terrible disasters that had just happened. Jesus uses these two disasters as illustrations to teach the crowd that they must repent or perish.

Jesus then tells them a parable. Jesus does that. He often follows up his teaching with a parable. Parables make no sense at the surface, but as you go deeper into the play on words and images, the simple story begins to make a lot of sense to those who can hear the deeper meaning of the words.

Now keep in mind that the fig tree in our Gospel reading today most probably was Jesus' way of cleverly describing the Jewish religious leadership. These religious leaders talked a good religious talk and used all the right "buzz words" and clichés but did not put their words into actions in their daily lives. The fig tree in the Gospel reading today symbolized the Pharisees who appeared healthy, they produced plenty of shadiness, but they produced no fruit.

We all know that a fruit tree, which bears no fruit, is a waste of time, space and energy.

But the gardener makes a case for patience, "Wait a minute. Let's give this tree one more chance, one more year. New manure. Good water. Let's give this tree one more chance to deepen its roots." That is what we hear from Jesus' parable today. God always gives us another chance, another season to live our lives in ways which God desires for us. But we are reminded in the retelling of those disasters in our reading today that we don't know how long we have left to change our ways. Now is the time to repent and bear fruit.

Here is a take on the subject from William Countryman's little book, *The Good News of Jesus*:

The new life of the good news is like this: There was a woman who lived in the country. She had no relatives there – not even any close neighbors. The nearest was an elderly man who lived a half-mile away. Behind her house she had a garden, and at the foot of the garden, two apple trees that were her pride and joy. Once she was called away to care for her only living relative, who was sick and lived very far away. She gave a key to the elderly man, who promised to look in on her house every week or so; but he was too infirm to care for her garden. She thought she would be away a few months, but she was gone two years. From far away, she heard about drought and storms. When at last the woman came home, she found her house had lost some shingles, and there was a little water damage inside. Then she went through the house and out into the garden. It was overgrown with tall grass and nettles. At the foot of the garden were her two apple trees. They were in bloom – at the height of their bloom, when apple trees look like white clouds with a touch of pink and the petals are just beginning to fall and carpet the ground with white as well. She stood awhile and drank it all in, and her heart filled with delight and thanks. Then she unlocked the tool-shed, took

out her pruners and, wading through the weeds, went down to the apple trees and began cutting out the dead-wood. And she thought of the day when she would have apples for herself and her neighbor.

In this season all around us we see the buds of fruit blossoms taking shape on the battered trees which surround us. Each year, fruit grows because it is attached to a branch of a living tree...a tree that is periodically pruned through hardship and unexpected trials.

The Good News is that God came to live among us as one of us to teach us about sin, repentance, and grace. God always gives us another chance, another season to live our lives in ways which God desires for us. So it is that the Great I AM became flesh and dwells among us to this day!

Amen.