

The Third Sunday in Lent
March 20, 2022; Year C
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud

Exodus 3:1-15; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9; Psalm 63:1-8

If you looked in your bulletin and saw the name of our ministry intern listed as the preacher today, you may be wondering what is happening. I am not your ministry intern, Chris. I am your rector, Nancy. Chris has a stomach bug and is recovering at home today. You know, there is not much good about this pandemic that we have been living with for the past two years—but if it has convinced us to pay attention to our bodies and to stay home when we are ill—well that is a good result. I am sure that Chris will be well soon, and that we will see her next month.

Meanwhile, we have these lessons from Holy Scripture to think about. And you know, sometimes it is easy to figure out how the signs and symbols of previous millennia relate to us today. But today is not one of those times. Burning bushes that boom out with God's voice, and destruction by serpents, and blood-sacrifices—none of these images speak to our post-modern sensibilities. So, where is the good news this morning?

Sometimes, instead of starting with the readings from Holy Scripture, we are so struck by world events that we start there. And that is why you have heard so many sermons in the past few years about the pandemic, and global climate change, and racism, and gun violence. And in a category of importance all by itself is the war in Ukraine—although I cannot think of that war without acknowledging that there are armed conflicts all over the globe today. These are world issues that are important to each one of us who lives in the world. And because we believe that God created us and God loves us, we believe that God cares about pandemics and wildfires and oppression and violence of all kinds.

So, we come here week by week, and we read Holy Scripture that is full of images that often leave us scratching our heads. And we bring with us worries and problems that seem insurmountable. Where is the good news?

In today's Gospel, folks have come to Jesus with a horrible story of violence and oppression. And Jesus understands their pain—but it doesn't lead him to issue a call to arms. He doesn't suggest that the folks rise up against Pilate, the Roman governor. Instead, he tells them a parable about mercy and judgment. And remember this about Jesus' parables. The meanings of them are not always clear and easy to understand—but they are always worth the struggle, because they shine a light on the good news.

There was a fig tree in the vineyard, and it wasn't growing any fruit. There was a tree, in an odd place, and not doing what trees are grown to do. And worse, this tree has been a bit of a failure as a tree for years now. So the owner wants to get rid of it. So far, this is a sensible story, but there is not a lot of good news.

But here is the good news—the gardener is going to give this tree one more chance. He is going to dig down a little bit, and cover the root system with what? Manure. Not plant food. Not Miracle Gro. Not even water. Manure.

Remember, this is a parable, not a textbook on raising trees. We have to dig at the story and tease out the details to perhaps learn a thing or two from it. The gardener is going to dig around the tree and cover it with waste from the animals. And I know that manure can be a reasonable fertilizer, and I know that there was no Miracle Gro in first century Galilee. But I also know that the details in Jesus' parables help us uncover his teaching. And in this story, we have a fruitless fig tree in a vineyard instead of an orchard, and a gardener who is starting with manure instead of water. And we are going to leave them all there for a moment, the manure and the gardener and the fruitless tree, and I am going to tell you a parable of my own.

There was once a parish of the Episcopal Church in a large city. In the late nineteenth century, it was a grand, large building on a beautiful street. It had a large, well-off congregation—rich, white people who all voted the same way, and were all happy to pray together every Sunday. And the years passed, and the fortunes of the neighborhood changed. Wealthy white people moved out to the suburbs, and people of all races and religions filled the neighborhood. These were busy, hard-working professional people, mind you. The neighborhood did not decline into blight and misery—but neither did it remain a bastion for the wealthy, English speaking folks.

As people of many different nationalities filled the neighborhood with ethnic restaurants and chattered in the street in dozens of languages, lots of small houses of worship were established, along with a hospital that grew and grew and grew to where it took over four city blocks, directly across the street from our parish church.

The congregation of the parish shrank as the original members moved away. But there were still some folks who liked to pray in English, using the Book of Common Prayer, and singing from the Hymnal. And there were lots of other folks who had moved to the city from various Caribbean islands. Many of them were members of Anglican churches in their home countries, and so, looking for the closest thing to what they knew, they found this Episcopal church. The prayer book was similar—but the music certainly was different. And the priest clearly didn't look like them. But it was church, and they attended every Sunday.

And so this congregation struggled. There were two factions split racially, and linguistically, and musically. And sometimes they had a white priest. And sometimes they had a black priest. And the music would swing back and forth according to which priest liked what. And the congregation shrank, and so did their service to their neighborhood and the world.

All of this took a while. A century after being founded, the Diocese noticed that this parish might be in trouble. A couple of decades later, at the Diocesan Offices, the bishop made a little list of the churches in his diocese that weren't doing very well. And he began a program to close those struggling parishes and help the remaining members to find homes in nearby, stronger parishes.

Meanwhile, our little parish struggled along. Fewer and fewer people attended. Less and less ministry was done outside the church. And the music still swung wildly between Afro-Caribbean praise music and English hymns. The old priest retired and the parish made do with supply priests who came in on a Sunday and sometimes even sang along.

At length, the bishop retired. And a new bishop was elected, a transition that took a couple of years. During the transition, no one thought of the old bishop's little list of churches that needed to close. But one day, the new bishop asked about it. And guess which parish was at the top of the list?

The new bishop had also just had an interview with a new, young priest in the diocese. He was in his late twenties, white, gay, unmarried, the son of Eastern European immigrants. He had found joy in the Episcopal Church in college and felt called to serve. But he was so young, and so smart, and so proudly out as a gay man, that even though the 21st century had turned, he was having trouble finding a church that would call him to be a rector. And maybe the Bishop remembered this parable of Jesus, but anyway, he decided to give the parish one more chance to grow. He offered them this young priest who had only been ordained a year or so and suggested that they try him out as their priest-in-charge. And if they could continue to pay him, and if they liked him, after a period of time, they could call him as their rector.

It has been over a decade now. In a completely unlikely turn of events, the young priest who couldn't find a church, and the church who couldn't settle on who they were and how to serve in the world ended up with each other. And they fell in love with each other. The congregation has grown—and it is almost as diverse as the neighborhood. The young priest has settled down, gotten married, and his husband recently became an Episcopalian himself. The music continues to alternate in style—but the difference is that now, everyone sings. And, everyone serves. The parish has become a beacon of service in the community. Even during the pandemic, when they offered their small garden as a place for meditation for the health care workers from the hospital across the street.

Let's give that little tree one more chance. Let's take what we have at hand to nourish it and see if that works. Because we want the tree to bear fruit! We want the tree to be exactly what God created it to be—even if it ends up in an unlikely place. Even if we don't have enough water—after all, we will always have manure!

Our lessons from Holy Scripture this morning are quite clear: God judges God's people. God notices when we are separated from the goodness and love that created us. God calls that sin, and sin leads to death. That is the judgment.

But there is mercy, too. More mercy than even we need. God's mercy is in such abundance that it is like manure, a naturally occurring, thoroughly renewable resource of goodness and love. And that goodness and love, if we spread it around, will help every one of God's created bear fruit. And we will become the folk that God created us to be. And the nightmares of war, and racism, and poverty will be overcome by the abundance of good fruit.