

Homily for the 3rd Sunday in Lent

March 23-24, 2019

Readings: Isaiah 55:1-9; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

Preacher: Sr. Joan Sobala

Today we hear about two pieces of vegetation that are not behaving like normal, healthy growing plants: a burning bush and a barren fig tree. At first glance, these phenomena might not mean much to us. Most of us have never seen a burning bush except for the shrubs that turn bright red in the autumn, and our soil and climate can't sustain fig trees with their nourishing fruit.

So what? Are we to dismiss these vivid Scriptural images as useless for our time and age? I hope not, for each offers the believer—or at least the questioner—a tool for learning something of Who God is, and what God seeks from us.

The first reading from Exodus, tells us how alert God is to the people whom He has created with love. God, like the burning bush, burns with love but is never consumed.

*I have seen the affliction of my people.
I have heard their cry. I know their suffering,
And I am coming to deliver them.*

Our God is moved by human suffering, appalled by it. Our God is opposition to human suffering, and does something about it. There's our first important take-home. Be opposed to human suffering and do something about it. It's easy to bemoan the suffering at our southern border, or in overloaded prisons or in places where natural disaster threatens countless people. God is on the side of those who suffer political, social and economic repression. God is with the Venezuelans, the Rohingya and the Palestinians who live in Gaza. Will we find some way to join God in being opposed to such misery?

Then there is the fig tree that Jesus speaks of. Remarkably it was planted in a vineyard. The biblical commentator William Barclay points out how unusual it is to be planted where the soil is rich. The fig tree was planted in a privileged place. Moreover, it was given another chance to bear fruit. We're not told the rest of the story. (Jesus has a way of leaving the ending out! I have a bucket list for when I cross over into eternal life. On my list is this fig tree. I want to know if it lived up to its second chance.) But what the barren fig tree also tells us is that we can't just accept life in a privileged place. We have to bear fruit. If we miss the opportunity the first time, we, too, are given another chance.

Now, in the middle of Lent, as we prepare ourselves to celebrate the mysteries of Holy Week and Easter, we pause over these readings. Take them to heart. We may be like Moses as he talks with God. "Send someone else." In effect, Moses is saying "Not me, Lord. I am too ordinary. Too busy. Not good enough."

Remember Oskar Schindler? He was a young, ambitious, pleasure loving German when the Nazis took over in the 1930s. Oskar Schindler was not a particularly good person. As a result of some dubious deals, Schindler found himself running a large factory in Nazi-occupied Poland. The work force in this plant was entirely composed of forced labor—mostly Jews, all of whom were destined for the extermination camps. What is remarkable about Schindler is that, over time, he became an immensely shrewd and courageous protector of his workers. Schindler put his disreputable talents to work to save thousands of lives. He survived the war, and the Jewish people didn't forget what he did. Schindler is buried in Israel and is numbered among the righteous Gentiles who gave so generously that Jews in danger might live.

Oskar Schindler is a splendid example of what happens when ordinary men and women, not necessarily heroic or saintly, are overcome by divine impatience in the face of human cruelty and suffering. God graces them with strength to overcome their apathy and passivity.

If we have not been particularly mindful of human need, God offers us like the barren fig tree, a second chance to find ways to bear the fruit of compassion

toward others. Like God in the burning bush, God says to us, “I am with you,” and in the same breath, “I send you.”

Will you—will I—be like Moses and accept the mission, however it is framed in our life and go to the places we are sent? Will you—will I—bear fruit?