

Exodus 20:1-17

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Lenten Psalm: *[Edited version, Ps 58, Nan Merrill's Praying the Psalms]*

1 Cor 1:22-25

Mark 11:12-25

The Fig Tree Then, The Fig Tree Now.

March 11, 2011

Third Sunday of Lent

By Jane Via

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We began this Lent asking, “From what should we fast this season?” We contemplated fasting from illusions which perpetuate our spiritual infantilism, and prevent us from being adults in our faith life. We spoke of fasting from illusions about God that no longer explain the cosmos. We contemplated fasting from the illusion that humans are the pinnacle of creation rather than one piece in its grand scheme.

At reconciliation, we explored the need to open paths to our unconscious where the soul dwells and the experience of the Sacred resides. We contemplated the dangerous illusion of equating our whole selves with our conscious selves, which results in projection of our individual capacity for evil on others. We considered facing our fear of self, as Jesus did in the desert, then choosing good over evil.<sup>1</sup>

Last week, Presider Rod Stephens spoke of the illusion that sacrifice - human, animal, or the “sacrifice” of the Mass - is necessary to be in harmony with the Sacred, to save ourselves from punishment, the illusion of the scapegoat. He encouraged us instead to embrace nourishment at the Table from which we go forth to courageous action.

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<sup>1</sup> See Carl Jung's The Undiscovered Self. New York and Scarborough, Ontario: The New American Library. A Mentor Book. 1957-1958. See also, “Lent - A Season for Self-Knowledge”, Jane Via, March 1, 2012.

The concept of God in Exodus is similar to that we saw in Genesis. Moses gives the law God gave Moses to the people of Israel. While the concept of law to structure society, and the content of the laws Moses gave, still make sense in general in the modern world, Moses' law is grounded in the concept of a vengeful, violent god: Keep these commandments or suffer God's wrath! Violate these commandments and divine vengeance will visit your descendants for generations!! This god punishes, not only the guilty, but the innocent for the sins of their ancestors. This god lacks credibility in our world, does not call us to respect, is a God to fear, a God who models violence. While science teaches us we might well fear the seemingly irrational and violent turns of nature, which can inflict massive suffering and death on hundreds of thousands of innocent people, we can no longer delude ourselves into believing that that nature's violence is God's righteous anger against humans nor delude ourselves that the humans who suffer and die in natural disasters deserve their fate. Rather, we face the reality that humans, like all other species of life on our planet, are sometimes subject to terror, agony and death in the due course of creation's self-expression.

Paul encourages his first century audience to stop equating the sacred with signs and to stop relying on reason alone to access the Sacred. For Paul, the cross is a multidimensional symbol which connects humans to the non-rational mystery of their relationship with the sacred.

Today's gospel invites us to set aside yet another illusion, the illusion that reality is limited to what we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. Though written long before the age of reason and long before empirical method emerged, the gospel challenges the equation of reality with that which is sensibly perceivable, observable and measureable, inviting us to set aside the illusion of literal thinking.

Do you find yourself not liking Jesus in this story very much? Does he seem like an ungrateful, petulant, destructive person? If so, that means you are already questioning a literal reading of the story.

On the way to Jerusalem, a hungry Jesus approaches a fig tree to see if it has figs. It has none; it's not the season for figs. The disciples watch as Jesus puts into words the condition of the tree: it will never again give figs. The disciples perceive Jesus' words as a curse. From that perspective, one rightly wonders, "why?" Cursing a tree seems so senselessly punitive.

In Jerusalem, Jesus infuriates the chief priests and scribes by throwing the money changers and those selling animals for sacrifice out of the Temple. In the evening, Jesus returns to Bethany. The following morning, on the road to Jerusalem again, Jesus and the disciples pass the fig tree which has withered, withered to its very roots! This tree is really dead. It will never again give figs. Peter exclaims over the withered tree, amazed that his teacher who stills storms and heals the sick can evoke the death of a fig tree. Jesus' reply seems unresponsive, focused on a meaning Peter hasn't contemplated: "Have faith. If you say to a mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown in to the sea', it will be done for you." Fig trees? Mountains? What?" Is Jesus' response a complete non-sequitur?

A major theme in Mark's gospel is the misunderstanding, or blindness, of the disciples. When Jesus teaches them, they repeatedly take his words literally, misinterpreting his intended meaning. Here Mark renews the theme.

Most commentators agree this gospel was written between 68 and 72 BCE, just before or just after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. The synoptic gospels agree that Jesus foresaw the destruction of the second Temple as Jeremiah had the destruction of the first Temple. I believe Mark wrote this gospel shortly *after* the Temple's destruction to explain to the early Christians, many of whom were Judeans, why God would allow God's own house to be destroyed and to

remind them Jesus foretold the Temple's destruction. The image of the fig tree is placed, like bookends, around Jesus' cleansing of the Temple, and explains – parabolically - why the Temple was destroyed. It was like a fig tree that no longer gave figs, a tree from which the hungry could not eat. It had become decadent; its worship misguided; its clergy self-serving; its rituals empty. It had outlived its season. Whatever spiritual food it once provided was no longer available there. Judeans were spiritually starving.

Read this way, the story of the fig tree is a parable. Read this way, Jesus' action dramatizes the infertility of the Temple cult, its lifelessness in Judean religion. Read this way, Mark continues the theme of the disciples' misunderstanding. They misunderstand about the fig tree because they take Jesus literally: they think he is cursing a tree rather than sharing his insight that the Temple is barren and will never be fruitful again. They miss his point that eliminating the Temple from Judean religion was like moving a mountain; yet it could and did happen.

This gospel challenges modern disciples to go beyond the literal meaning of everything to the deeper realities conveyed by symbols, images and metaphors. The Temple has been gone for millennia. Yet, we – now - live in the shadow of a withered fig tree. It no longer bears fruit; its season too is past. Like Jesus, if we turn to this tree to be fed, we go hungry. We go hungry if we seek our spiritual food in the literal, rational world of dogma, totalitarian ecclesiastical power, antiquated theology and deceptive anthropology.

We turn - to the simplicity, radical inclusivity and compassion of the rabbi who taught us to fast from illusions of religion and culture, to live free to feast at the Table of Holy Love and courageous action.

Mark invites us to treat signs not as a proofs of God but as links to our unconscious where the Sacred dwells; to go beyond reason and the rational, to the uncomfortable, irrational realm where the deepest mysteries of Life can be experienced in holy awe. In an ancient sort of discourse, Mark conveys that it's an illusion that reality is limited to the experience susceptible to our senses and our rational mind is all of reality.