

## “Flowering To Redemption”

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Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Isaiah 55:1-9

Luke 13:1-9

I often discuss with the worship committee the importance of involving children in worship, including having them as the scripture readers from time to time. Karen, our new worship chair, emailed me a month ago and asked, “How about letting Kai read scripture on Lent 3?” I looked up the scripture passage before answering and groaned: I barely understand that passage myself! How can I expect a 7-year old to understand what she’s reading?!

The first part of the gospel passage speaks of two disasters happening: one a political disaster, where Pilate killed multiple Galileans. The other, a tower in Siloam that fell, killing 18. We can easily substitute these scenarios with our own current disasters: a cyclone in Mozambique, a mass shooting in New Zealand. Jesus makes it clear that none of these disasters happened because they were deserved, as a punishment for sin; for their actions were no worse than any of our own.

However, Jesus said, we do each need to repent, or we will make disasters of our own lives.

Explain that to a 7-year old! But you know, there is something to be said about knowing something before we understand it. That is one of the reasons we allow children of all ages to take communion in our church. The truth is, for all of us there will always be some element of mystery to the sacraments. And yet we eat and drink, recognizing that the basic level of being hungry and thirsty for it is enough for Christ to come and meet us in it. As we grow in understanding, layers of meaning get added to enrich our experience and the ways we know God through it. The parables are like that. The foundations of our scripture and practices act as seeds that lay dormant in their minds for years, until one day they bloom into glorious fruits and flowers.

Each week I prepare the sermon I will give with the hopes that it will add inspiration to your practice of being disciples of Jesus Christ. However, if I am honest, I am sure there are days when my preaching awakens nothing in you. But my hope is that at the end of the morning, the fact that you sat in the pew for an hour or so and went through the

rhythms of worship left you feeling some kind of holy connection that will shape your week moving forward.

In the parable of the fig tree, a man takes note that a fig tree that had been planted in his vineyard had not produced any figs. For three years he had been checking on this tree, and had not seen it bear any fruit. Cut it down! It should not be a waste of soil!" the man complained to his gardener.

I wonder how many of you come to church, sit in your pews, and wait for something glorious to happen-- only to leave feeling fruitless. I had a parishioner once named Conrad. Conrad was a young adult at the time. He had never been a Christian but started coming to the church as part of our church's softball team. His pitcher's arm helped us finally earn our first win against the Lutherans (but we still couldn't beat the Baptists or any of the other bar-sponsored teams). After a few months at the church, Conrad got a job that finally got him out of his parents' house. Not only that, he met his first long term girlfriend. He felt like the church was truly blessing him, and so he chose to get baptized.

Fast forward two years later. Conrad's girlfriend broke his heart. He lost his job. He moved back in with his parents. He felt like the church was no longer blessing him. He felt like a fruitless tree. "Why bother coming to church?" he wondered. To him it seemed like God had failed him, and he believed his worshipping practice was pointless.

Too bad he did not stay. Conrad had found a time in his life where perhaps he needed the church the most. He needed others who could hold him up, testify that he is a bearer of the image of God, no matter how poorly he felt of himself. He needed to hear the good news of the gospel which repeats the truth that out of loss comes new life, that endings are beginnings and that blessing often comes through struggle. On a more basic level, he needed people who could see in him gifts worth sharing, whether it was working with the youth group or sorting food at the food pantry, replacing a lightbulb in the sanctuary rafters or setting up the coffee cart. I wonder if he stayed a little longer, and let the church do its work on him, if he would discover again that he could bear fruit. It may not look like prosperity or romance; the gospel does not promise to make us rich. But it does promise to give us life.

The gardener argued for patience and persistence instead of cutting the tree down. He also suggested some ways the tree could be tended better to encourage fruit to spring forth.

The one piece of advice the gardener gave, along with waiting, was to help the tree by putting manure around it. We know manure is animal poop, great fertilizer for trees and all kinds of crops. What is the muck of our lives? Can it be possible that under Jesus' care, the muck might be turned into rich fertilizer? In our Prayer of Confession, we lay out our muck before God and one another, and in that time it gets transformed into something rich and lifegiving, which is forgiveness. The gardener in the parable seems to think we can do a little more work with the muck of our lives to move it around and then see life spring forth.

But poop isn't much to work with. So wanting to find out more info about fig trees, I texted my sister Alice. Alice lived with her family for 2 years in Tbilisi in Eastern Europe. She had several fig trees in her yard there, and when they moved back to Atlanta, GA, she planted fig trees in her yard there too. When the fruits are in season, she's constantly making fig jam and fig newtons.

When I asked her what helps to coax fig trees to bear fruit, she replied, "Rain; it will look like the fig trees have nothing interesting going on, and then it will rain and, Boom! Several ripe figs seem to appear overnight." I wonder if the fig tree in Jesus' parable lacked rain or a nearby source of water. We know water shows up repeatedly in the bible as something that offers salvation: the waters of creation; the waters that floated Noah's ark and later the waters that floated a basket carrying the baby Moses in the Nile when he was saved; the waters of the Red Sea that Moses later parted to let the Hebrews out of slavery; Jesus' living water offered to the woman at the well; and of course, the baptism offering by John and then Jesus.

I visited Peru years ago, and took the trip to Cuzco, the ancient capital of the Inca Empire. Cuzco sits high in the Andean mountains. The altitude was over 11,000 feet there. Our guides warned us to constantly drink water to avoid getting altitude sickness, even if we did not feel thirsty. If we felt thirsty, it was a sign we were already dehydrated.

I suspect many of us are spiritually thirsty and do not even realize it, so we do not turn to the living water that can quench our thirst. Does that mean that we literally go to the font and plunge our faces in? Probably not, but the visual symbol stays in the sanctuary as a reminder of its presence in our lives. We may find a cup of water through prayer; a gushing spring through participating in a bible study group, or a cleansing waterfall through the practice of forgiving someone else.

My sister pointed out one more thing that helps bring forth fruit from the fig tree, and I found it the most fascinating bit. She told me that fig wasps pollinate the figs. They enter the fig at the base of the fruit. The female burrows her way into the fig, losing her antennae and wings as she squeezes her body through. Once inside the fruit, she lays eggs in it, also dropping pollen from the last fig tree she has visited. Then, her tasks are finished. Wingless, she gives up her life and dies inside the fruit which absorbs her body in its flower, which blooms inside of the fruit. In the meantime, her eggs hatch, and the male wasps, born without wings and never to leave the fig fruit, impregnate the newly hatched female wasp and help burrow a way out of the fruit for her. She goes on to continue the cycle of life, dropping her eggs and pollen into the next fruit tree.

There is so much sex happening inside these figs; it is no wonder to me that Genesis claims Adam and Eve grabbed fig leaves to cover themselves when they realized they were naked!!

As icky as the fig wasps may sound, in my research I read that fig wasps are some of the best things to ever happen to fig trees. They allow the cycle of life to continue. Unlike some organisms that are parasites to trees and suck the life out of them, such as Emerald Ash Borer, who lays eggs in trees and has destroyed all the Elm trees in our region, science calls the relationship between fig wasps and fig trees **mutualism**. They have a mutual benefit to one another: the tree helps the wasp by harboring her eggs, and the wasp helps the tree by spreading its pollen.

As I think of the female wasp losing her wings and antennae as she burrows into a fig fruit to lay her eggs, one last action before she loses her life, I am reminded this Lent of Jesus' journey to the cross. I wonder how Jesus might be trying yet again to burrow his way into my life and yours, to generously release the seeds that will cause new life to grow in us. I like to think that experience as not only life giving for me or for you, but life-giving to God, for it allows Jesus to live yet again.

Spring has just arrived within the last 4 days, and here I am talking about the birds and the bees. Even in these days that are still bare and chill, I suspect new life is buzzing. Look for its buds, and pray for its life-giving power in you. Amen.