

Sermon, Advent 1, Year C, December 2, 2018, Jane A. Beebe

I think it matters that Jesus chooses the fig tree parable to illustrate to the disciples that God's kingdom is near. The fig is not just any tree. It is a rich and most compelling image for the Israelites. There is the wonderful passage from Micah chapter 4: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken." (Micah 4:3-4)

Traditionally rabbis would sit under a fig tree to offer their teachings and scriptural interpretations. Judges sat under trees to offer their wisdom and arbitrations. Being "under the fig tree" means we are living in the world God has envisioned for us. This is God's kingdom where there is abundance, justice, peace, and freedom from fear. Throughout the Bible we hear how figs are sources of food, shade, and protection. In preparing another sermon about vines and branches I learned that fig trees and grapevines were often grown together: the fig trees supported the vines as a natural trellis. Is it any wonder that the fig tree represents God's covenantal promises to us?

The fig in the parable has just sprouted new leaves—figs are deciduous. Season after season, the leaves fall, the fig may even go dormant in winter. How is

one to discern if it is even alive? Our sign that warmth and new life is near is the sprouting of the leaves. I am reminded of a passage from Job:

“For there is hope for a tree,
if it is cut down, that it will sprout again,
and that its shoots will not cease.
Though its root grows old in the earth,
and its stump dies in the ground,
yet at the scent of water it will bud
and put forth branches like a young plant.’ (Job 14:7-9)

All it takes is the scent of water! All it takes for us is the water of baptism, the mere whiff of the Holy Spirit. We are revived, restored, and reminded that we can be confident that God is near, God’s kingdom is near.

Similarly, in our passage from Jeremiah, we hear that, “[God] will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David.” This sort of branch is associated with a family tree and maybe not so much a live tree. Still, it is hard not to associate the two passages as the wise creators of our lectionary have done. Jeremiah was a prophet to the Jews living in exile in Babylon. Jeremiah’s task was to sustain the spiritual resilience of an exilic people.

Jeremiah’s commission from God was, “...to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” (Jeremiah 1:10) Our passage comes from the comforting portion of Jeremiah where he takes on a more hopeful tone. Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann says that is “the resolve of God’s own heart” to “restore, revive, and rehabilitate God’s people and God’s city.”

(Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah*, p. 266, 269) God is not only *able* to rebuild and replant, it is in God's own merciful nature to do so. I think of that beautiful quotation from Julian of Norwich, "All can be well; all will be well; all shall be well."

Last week in the local paper I read about one of the many Christmas tree farms that we are blessed to have in western Massachusetts. I learned that, "Unlike most tree farms, [the couple that runs the farm] grows [its] sustainable balsam Christmas trees from stumps instead of replanting them year after year. Which means that instead of cutting their trees close to the ground, they cut above a few whorls of branches. This technique, also called coppicing, keeps the stump alive to produce more sprouts the next year. The benefits are many: "There's no fuel involved with growing. You don't mow anything. You don't have to plant seedlings every year. You don't have to use pesticides because it's a complex ecosystem. It makes a lot of sense," he says. "This is how Christmas trees used to be grown across the U.S." (Andy Castillo, *Daily Hampshire Gazette*)

It makes sense that this season of the year we would bring trees and branches into our homes! (Even years when I cannot manage a whole tree, I try at least to have a balsam wreath on my front door, so I can drink in its scent). The freshness of the color and scent bring a visceral reminder that God is present with us. How wonderful that God has created trees: how much they can teach us! Trees

are rooted in the ground. Their source of water and nourishment is hidden to an extent, yet it means that they are connected to life in such a way that new branches can spring from what appear to be lifeless stumps. There is a Chinese proverb that says, “If you keep a green bough in your heart, surely the singing bird will come.”

Recently, I was culling through some older Facebook posts and found a photograph of an orchid I had posted a couple of years ago. A friend had given me the orchid cutting as a gift. I am not always that skillful in caring for indoor plants so am surprised and happy when a plant not only survives but thrives. I had posted the picture on FB because the orchid chose to bloom in early spring when not much had come up outside yet. I commented that seeing the blooms gave me hope. A bit later I learned that a work colleague had lost her dad to early-onset Alzheimer’s. I gave the orchid to her. Almost one year to the day, on a similar, early-spring day she too posted on Facebook that her orchid had bloomed. She said, “I am terrible at orchids, so I’m delighted to see this lovely little thing on such a dreary day.”

Last summer when I was at Bishop’s House on the isle of Iona, I was delighted to meet an Anglican priest who was serving as chaplain for our retreat group. At Compline one evening she shared this poem by Kenneth Steven. He is a contemporary Scottish poet and writer. I asked the priest for a copy and she kindly

copied out for me. I forgot that I had been carrying it around with me in my bag all this time...

“The Giver of Life” by Kenneth C. Steven

I see a man coming towards me
Across the edge of the shore where light
Breaks and cries in an endless voice.
In one hand he carries water, fresh and clear,
In the other earth, rich and crumbled.
Where he stoops in the pale shadow,
He brings forth to the treeless land a sapling,
Gently presses its roots in the soft ground.
Mingling the earth and water for its strength, he says:
This is the life I give you, for storm and calm,
For harvest and drought, for spring and winter.
Grow for the light of the world.