

# Lenten Meditations

2010

All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 8, 2010

There are times in our life when we, like the fig tree, feel called to lay fallow. When we have been giving so much of ourselves, that our actual being becomes thin and wearied, and we don't have the emotional and spiritual resources to offer to our family, our friends, much less the strangers that God sends our way. That is when it is time to take a step back, to take a break from the busyness for refreshment and renewal. At certain times, this fallow period may be as short as a weekend retreat, and at other times it may mean stepping away from a ministry for an extended period of time before renewing engagement. We all need a break sometimes. It is so hard to give ourselves permission to take these breaks, to stop moving so quickly through our lives. But this time away from busyness can be incredibly valuable. In taking a step back and sorting through the manure there are vital nutrients that revitalize and renew us.

I can talk the talk, but I am not so good at living into this spiritual practice of laying fallow. I want to be involved! I want to get my hands dirty and do ministry. It is a really hard discipline, when the time comes, to sit back and contemplate where God might be calling me. Throughout my life, I have found that at times instead of deciding to take a step back, this period of laying fallow has been imposed upon me. Perhaps it is God's hand nudging me to slow down, take a break and prepare for the next step on my journey.

But when we do take that time to sit still, to be quiet and listen for God, when we do breathe those even, deep breaths of centeredness and peace, it can be an incredible time of preparation and renewal. In those quiet spaces, we may finally be able to hear God calling us into new directions in our lives and in our work in the world. In this busy world, in our busy lives the stillness and quiet can be very alluring, but we are not meant to linger in this fallow space forever. If we remain there we can become part of the manure, rather than becoming the rich fruit God desires us to be. We are meant to move on from that space and reconnect, reengage. The stillness restores our energy reserves and prepares us to go out and offer our gifts to the world.

Be open to being still, laying fallow, that you may bear luscious fruit for God to offer the world.

*The Rev'd Elizabeth Shows Caffey*

March 9, 2010

Don't these words have new meaning this year? Blood of worshippers on the altar, falling towers—the news photos and amateur videos from Haiti, the words of newspapers and official documents tell us of the losses, Holy Trinity Cathedral, the Sisters of St. Margaret Convent and College St. Pierre, church buildings in Grand Colline and St. Etienne. Four people were killed while worshiping in Trouin. We have a better picture of those old events because we have just seen new pictures of fallen towers and crushed bodies. We had not thought before that every slain Galilean had a mother or a wife, left orphans or brothers to mourn. We had not considered that a collapsing tower might have left people maimed as well as dead. A terrible picture it is but read on; it is not Judgment Day.

Was the comment to Jesus a question? Was it a question about those trouble-making Galileans or those offenders at Siloam? He seems to know that it was and what the question was. Did these people get what they deserved? Were they destroyed as a punishment; is this judgment? He is impatient with those questions. I understand them; I understand that it is the need to feel protected from harm that leads us even if just for a moment to hope those who are terribly hurt deserved what they got—forgetting that we are probably lucky not to get what we deserve. And when something terrible happens, we want to know why, to have just that smidgeon of control that understanding why seems to give us.

But wait! This is about us, about the questioners. We can't look on smugly because no tragedy has befallen us. We cannot protect ourselves in this way. "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish..." These surely are troubling words. This is the Good News? These words turn the scrutiny back on us—no more sniffing out the sins of our neighbors. We'd best be concerned with our own hearts.

We will always wonder about earthly and heavenly justice, about why bad things happen. It seems our concern with these questions better not get in the way of repentance—turning to God.

This incident occurs after Jesus rebukes the crowd for not understanding the times they were in. These are the last months of his life and the words are urgent, "Repent or die." Repent thunders through Lenten readings; repent sounds the trump in Luke. Then we have a parable, a story that slows us down and calls us to tease out its meanings. The fig tree parable holds in tension the burden of the command and its own meanings expanding on what repenting may involve and touching us at last with mercy.

We all know that to repent is to turn—it is not about feelings of regret; it is about how we live. Return to how we are called to live, return to the One to whom we belong, be the people we are created to be. Bear fruit, stubborn fig tree, or be cut down. The one more year asked by the tender of figs may not be intended to carry that specific segment of time outside the context of the story. But it is clear that it is not about some sweet day I will bear fruit. One more year is one more fruiting season. Repent clearly does not mean "Repent when you feel like it."

*Ethel Ware Carter*

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2010

All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 10, 2010

Death. When will it come to us? How will it arrive? What can we do to dodge it, cheat it, put it off, sidestep it for a while? What will happen to us afterwards? It is the unavoidable lot of us all. Fear of death has been a prime religious motivation and obsession of mankind for the ages, so it is not surprising that when people gathered around Jesus they asked him questions about death.

Death comes to us all, whether by the hands of evil men like Herod, by natural disasters like the victims of the earthquake that felled the tower of Siloam or the one that razed Port au Prince, by disease, in childbirth or in the quiet sleep of old age. We have all offered prayers begging God to spare us or our loved ones, and sometimes it seems that such prayers work and the crash is averted by inches, the surgery is successful against all odds, the cancer goes into remission and the lost child is found unharmed. But the inevitable is only delayed. Even Lazarus, who was raised from the dead by the voice of Christ in the greatest miracle before the mighty resurrection, died again. His family and friends had to put on their mourning clothes and call the undertaker and the caterer over to the house one more time.

Our obsessions, however, are not Christ's. I believe that He wants us to be less concerned with life after death and more with life after birth. Accept the joy that life has to offer us, welcome God's love into our hearts by seeking the wisdom to discern who we were each created to be, and having the courage to live that life confidently, without fear or anxiety; living not to fulfill others' expectations, but true to the image of God in which we were uniquely created.

If we cannot so welcome Christ's love into our hearts, then it doesn't really matter what good works we do, for without love they gain us nothing. Spending our lives doing what we are "supposed to do" out of a bitter sense of obligation leaves a faint stench of death with us and with the recipients of our loveless gifts. What's the fun in that? Where is the joy in giving from mere duty?

Like the fig tree that does not accept the promise of its creation by producing fruit of its kind, if we do not allow ourselves to experience joy and thus produce the fruits of love we may as well be dead. "I set before you death and life, blessings and curses. Now choose life..."

*James Marshall*

# Lenten Meditations

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All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 11, 2010

I am the Accuser.  
I am the Blamer.  
I am the One who knows that They are wrong and I am right.  
I am the Splitter between left and right, up and down, good and bad.

I am perishing, Lord.  
I am withering away.  
I am shrinking up.  
I am coming to nothing.

Please do not cut me off.  
I cease to exist without you.

*Do not worry, Dear One.  
It is not possible to separate Myself from You.*

*Who looks outside, perishes.  
Who looks inside, bears fruit.*

*I see You.  
I am here.*

*Dissolve into Me.*

*It is here.  
The moment of Our Reunion.*

*Kathryn Larisey Burke*

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*March 12, 2010*

In the passage, a group of Jews report the slaughter of Galileans in the temple to Jesus. I imagine that they were expecting him to share their outrage. But Jesus admonishes them to repent because they will likewise perish. I suppose that the people were perplexed and even disappointed at this turning of the tables. Then Jesus broadens the scope of the lesson by using the disaster of a falling tower where 18 people were killed and again tells the people to repent or they will perish, too.

Jesus uses the metaphor of a fig tree to explain. When the fig tree fails to produce fruit, even after being fertilized, the owner of the vineyard cuts it down so that it will no longer waste space.

At first Jesus' reaction to the people seemed harsh to me. Then it occurred to me that they were reporting the atrocity to him in an effort to get him to "take sides." Rather than responding to them politically, Jesus warns them not to focus on the injustices occurring in the world but to repent, to reflect on themselves.

Like the fig tree, as Christians, we are expected to be fruitful and produce. If our spiritual lives are not tended to, we will "perish."

How often do we pass judgment on a person or situation before we turn inward and contemplate? It takes a lot of practice—deep breathing, centering, finding a still place inside—to approach life from this perspective. But when we achieve it, we find that is a peaceful, joyous and fruitful existence.

*Lisa Chambliss*

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*March 13, 2010*

In Luke 13:6-9 there is contained a parable which seems to hold fairly current relevancy and has given me something to think about during Lent. The story is of a landowner (farmer) who has concluded that one of his fig trees should be cut down because it has not produced any fruit for three consecutive years. He orders a servant to cut down the tree but the servant is convinced that with more care, fertilizer and hope the tree will again produce and he pleads with his owner to give it more time... another year, after which he will then cut down the tree if it remains barren.

This situation is not dissimilar to the current economic circumstances facing Atlanta, and most of our country. Many are discouraged, disheartened and fairly pessimistic about their financial circumstances. This naturally weighs heavily on our emotions, our relationships and challenges our faith at times. The Great Recession will eventually be resolved and things will improve. Until we actually see the improvement, however, we should nurture each other, be supportive of those attempting to solve the problems and allow time to pass without giving up hope and cutting down the tree.

Over the past 25 years we could not have lived in a better city or country. We now, however, face many challenges. Let's give deep personal thought to how we can contribute to the eventual solutions while remaining optimistic and patient.

*George Olmstead*