

March 7, 2010  
Lent III  
The Rev. Kathy Crary

St James Episcopal Church

Traveling in the wilderness is part of the deep story of the Hebrew people and of the Jewish religion; journey is a familiar concept. From our own historical perspective, we see the wandering of the Hebrews after they left slavery in Egypt. They were enslaved and carried off again in the Babylonian Exile and the Jews' return home after Cyrus the Persian defeated Babylon. We know, too of the spreading of Judaism throughout Eastern Europe, Western Europe and the world after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. I think the common term for this is the Jewish Diaspora. And in our own day, we have the sort of coming home to the land of Judah, later named Israel, as the Jewish state is established at the end of World War II, and, as always, challenged in its mere existence.

Over and over again the people in this covenant with God have gone out and returned. Today's lessons are such a recounting of history, the call of the people from the slavery of Egypt, the call of the believers from the enslavement of sin and then, the tree of today's gospel lesson.

In juridical terms, the fig is under contract to produce fruit and for three years it has failed to live up to its end of the contract, in spite of the best efforts of the gardener. The owner is not pleased with the failure of the contract, especially when we wanted to reap the benefits of some figs.

The tree is given a reprieve by the gardener, but for one more series of seasons. One more cycle, produce or be cut down.

This is okay to hear for as long as you and I equate this story to the Hebrew history of the earlier reading or the early church struggles with the sin thing. Or the old headline "Several killed in Siloam Tower Collapse". As long as we can look at this parable and see someone else facing the

scrutiny, it is a safe parable. But you and I KNOW parables aren't supposed to be safe territory.

Here, then, is the question. According to Reformation history, we are supposed to rely on the grace and goodness of God for our salvation. It is faith, not works, which saves us. That works out okay until we totally abdicate responsibility for caring for our neighbors and ourselves according to Jesus' summation of the 10 Commandments and all the Law and writings that came after them.

What happens if we REALLY love God. This isn't lip service paid to God, this isn't something dreamy and filmy like a fantasy movie, this isn't fly with little cherub wings above the fray below, this is love God in the gritty and hard-edged life of 21<sup>st</sup> century reality. This is loving God and praying with intention to something way bigger than we can describe and so much more powerful than our imaginations can capture. This is believing in God and loving God in all the descriptors of terrible majesty, enduring love and care, hopefulness and judgment. All of this is about God.

So the tree is allowed to continue for three years and the gardener begs for a fourth year. What does that mean about the next year for us? I'm not playing a guilt trip here, I'm just asking the question. If the primary reason for existing is to love God and love our neighbors, without a definition that restricts who the neighbor is, where are we, in this congregation?

Back to the tree: It had produced fruit at one point and then stopped. If the repairs don't work the tree is going to be chopped down. If we look at ourselves, as individuals, how do we feel about this sentence? Is it for us? Are we spurred to do better, whatever that means, because we love God or fear the axe?

Finally, even if the tree is cut down, there is something to be saved for this story. The wood will be used for something else. It could be a shepherd's staff, or kindling to light a cooking fire. It could be made into planks for building a roof support, or carved into a cart frame or a piece of furniture, all the things Jesus knew how to do with his own hands.

There is no loss in this image, only change and re-use. It is recycling at its best. And the Jews were familiar with the hard changes of politics, exile, enslavement and massive cultural change.

We would do well to learn from the Hebrew people and be prepared to remake ourselves and our ministries; change is a-comin' for this congregation, for the whole of God's church and most especially in the ministries of this Diocese. As individuals and as a parish we would do well to heed the word of the parable and do the work that is necessary to produce the fruit promised to the people of the covenant.