

Third Sunday in Lent
March 7, 2010

I wonder how many of you are planning to watch the Academy Awards presentation this evening. Award shows are pretty popular in our household. Tish and I will watch the Academy Awards, the Oscars, this evening just like we watch the Screen Actors Guild or SAG Awards, the Tony Awards, the Emmy Awards and the Grammy Awards. Maybe my favorite of all the award shows is the Country Music Awards. Just about every performer who gets a Country Music award starts off the acceptance speech thanking God for his or her talent and for being the reason the artist is standing there being honored. I find it really touching to see someone in blue jeans and a cowboy hat and boots saying that “I first want to thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for the blessings I have in my life”.

But anyway, back to the Academy Awards. A category is announced, such as Best Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role, and the names of 5 nominees are read. The presenter opens an envelope and announces the winner. Then maybe there's another category, let's say Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role. Again, the names of 5 nominees are read, the presenter opens an envelope and the winner is announced in that

category. The awards go on and on. And there are what I think of as the Lesser awards as well. These aren't any less important, but they're not the big names on the marquis. These include Best Achievement in Art Direction, Best Achievement in Costume Design and Best Documentary Feature.

Sometimes when I think about the folks in the Bible I think about how things take place at the Academy Awards. Picture, won't you, the presenter standing up and announcing "the nominees for Best Patriarch or Prophet in a Leading Role are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Isaiah and Moses." And the envelope is opened and one of them comes up to the stage to be honored. Then another presenter might stand up and say "the nominees for Best Prophet in a Lesser Role are Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah and Micah." Again, the envelope is opened and one of them comes up to receive the award. A little later another presenter might stand up and say "the nominees for Best Apostle are Peter, Andrew, James, John, and Matthew." There's great suspense here since we've already seen the mother of James and John ask that they have particular places of honor in heaven and we've heard Jesus refer to Peter as the rock on which the church will be built. But then the envelope gets opened and one of those five is designated BEST Apostle. And the crowd goes wild with applause. And just like the lesser awards at the Oscars,

there are the lesser, but no less important, awards in the Bible. This morning's readings made me picture a presenter coming up to the podium and saying "and now, the nominees for Best Foliage used to Illuminate a Bible Story are the Burning Bush, the Fig Tree that hadn't borne fruit in three years, the tiny Mustard Seed that grew into the biggest of all bushes, the Olive Branch that the dove brought to Noah after the Flood and the Sheaves of Wheat bowing down in Joseph's dream. That would be a pretty tough call because they're all so important in illuminating stories. And at the end, after the envelope was opened and a winner was announced we'd realize, just like we realize when we watch the award shows, that all of the nominees are winners. But like any of the award shows, a winner has to be designated. And so the presenter opens the envelope and announces that the winner in the category of foliage used to illuminate a Bible story is **THE FIG TREE THAT HASN'T BORNE FRUIT IN THREE YEARS**. And the crowd goes wild with applause.

So let's look for a moment at the fig tree that hadn't borne fruit in three years. The parable in today's gospel reading is a little agricultural metaphor just dripping with judgment and grace. We need to realize that the writer in Luke's gospel is making a joke in the Greek language. The word for "manure" is, in fact, not so refined; it is street slang, or what we might call a "swear word." So

think of the harshest possible word for manure, and then imagine the gardener – or tenant farmer – saying it to the wealthy absentee landowner, followed by “and if in a year you are still not happy, YOU cut it down!” There would be serious snickering among the tenant farmers and servants in the crowd who only dreamed of ever talking back at their superiors in such a fashion.

What the story conveys in part is that the absentee owner does not get his hands dirty, knows little of how to tend fig trees, and is trying to tell someone who knows the tree, the soil, and the kind of care necessary how to do his job.

And it is the gardener who introduces the notion of grace. “Sir, let it alone,” he says, in essence. “Don’t blame the tree, don’t order me to cut it down – give it another chance. Give it a moment of grace. Give it a chance, and it will bear fruit in its own time.”

When you hear this parable do you get it that we are the landowner blaming the tree for its lack of fruitfulness? And that we are the gardener proposing to wait patiently for God’s grace. And that we are also the tree, standing in need of God’s grace?

Every day when we wake up and get out of bed, God is bestowing upon us a great deal of grace, whether we deserve it or not.

Lent is a season that means to remind us that we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under God's table. But it is God's primary attribute to have mercy upon us as long as we keep on repenting of our various sins. At this particular time of the year we continue to hear how much God loves us and forgives us, no matter what.

During this season of Lent, we remember our Baptism, the time when we were marked and sealed as Christ's own forever. We also realize that we are to support each child, each person in their life in Christ. The paschal light of Christ and the Baptismal waters beckon us and strengthen us in our relationship to God and to each other.

In today's gospel Jesus told a story to people who were around him. They were wondering about who was more guilty of their sins. They wondered, could it be that those Galileans who died as victims of Pilate's anger were the most guilty? Could it be those eighteen people who were crushed by the tower of Siloam are really the most guilty? They also wondered if they were guilty. And Jesus responded to them by telling them the parable of the fig tree, a story that is filled with mystery.

Jesus told the people that all were guilty, not just those killed by Pilate or those killed by the falling tower. Jesus said that everyone

was in need of redemption, all needed to turn to God and come closer to God. The people must have wondered how much does God care for us, love us, if we are guilty? The parable revealed to them that God gave them time to grow and to become fruitful.

Now, 21 centuries later, we hear the same story, even though we live in a very different world. Our world has daily, random death and violence. The statistics of drug abuse, teenage suicide, and childhood violence are higher than the number of children who attend church school every Sunday across the United States. And we wonder who is responsible, who is the one who is more guilty. To hear this parable we are reminded that we are all guilty and that our turning to God to come closer to God takes intentional care, nurturing, and work. We are given time to grow; we are all growing in our baptism. The fruit that we bear is keeping the promises of our Baptism. The promises of the Baptismal Covenant are the fruit of our baptism. The promise to continue in the Apostles' teaching, in breaking bread, and in the prayers; the promise to repent and turn to the Lord; the promise to proclaim the Gospel, to seek and serve Christ by striving for justice and peace among all people. These promises are made in our daily life. Think of the promises as the fig tree. We know they need special care, protection, and that they need time to grow in order to bear fruit in our daily life. The question is how do we keep these promises.

I would like to share with you four thoughts from a contemporary theologian and youth leader, Amanda Hughes.

The first thought is to "speak gently as the Lord spoke gently." Speak words of peace, words of hope, words of love. Think of the collect for purity, how we pray that God cleanse the thoughts of our hearts so that we are able to perfectly love.

The second thought is "tell the truth of the Gospel no matter how tough it is." Think about how Jesus always brought the disciples to the truth of the matter. They wanted to know where do we find the Kingdom of God? Who is the greatest? Who has the most guilt? Jesus did not hedge, he told them the truth and that is what people want and need to hear. They want to hear from us that they are loved and forgiven by God.

The third thought is, "get brave." The Gospel requires change. Remember the dismissal every Sunday when we are asked to be given strength and courage to be sent forth into the world, into the culture, to bring reconciliation and peace.

The fourth and last thought is, "Yield to Joy." Give laughter, look beyond the moment and find humor. Jesus often told the disciples that he came so that their joy might be complete.

This is the message of our Gospel lesson this morning. When the people were asking who was guilty, Jesus spoke gently, yet he told the truth, he was brave, he told them that they needed to turn to the Lord, and then he told them to get brave and yield to joy in the little parable of the fig tree.

We continue to grow in our Baptism this Lent. As we look toward the Easter Vigil, the paschal candle and the baptismal waters that await us, we remember the promises we have made to God and to each other, and we continue to seek ways to take these promises into our daily life.

Let us remember the story of the fig tree, the hope of it bearing fruit after being given care and nurture and special attention, as we go forth taking the promise of the Baptismal Covenant into our world by speaking gently, telling the truth of the Gospel, getting brave, and yielding to joy. Here we find ourselves in the twenty-first century in this rapidly changing culture, and it is truly the best time to be a Christian. Amen.