

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

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Jeremiah 33:14-16; 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13; Luke 21:20-36

“Look at the fig tree and all the trees . . . you can see for yourselves. . . .” – Luke 21:29

This morning's reading from the gospel of Luke is one of the reasons Advent is a time when the people who preach and the people who listen start to get mildly put out with one another.

The twenty-first chapter of Luke is not, I daresay, where most of you would start the church year. You probably think of Advent as the time when we prepare for Christmas, for God's coming among us in the form of a baby in Bethlehem. It's a cozy season, swaddled in a great deal of sentiment – and more than a little sentimentality – festooned with garlands of evergreen, and practically aglow with candlelight and good cheer. This time of year is when we struggle to create artificially the light and warmth that ebbed away with the passing of summer and autumn. It's no accident that those of us who live in cold northern climates have lots of winter holidays with an abundance of food, drink, and fellowship.

And the Christmas season is just that – a season. The holiday parties and open houses begin right after Thanksgiving, and they'll last all the way through New Year's Day, more than a month. Our culture goes to considerable lengths to make sure that we make ourselves as merry and bright as we can for at least one of those four dark and dreary months of winter.

So you all who listen sometimes get quite peeved with us-all who preach when we drop a text like this morning's gospel reading into the middle of the festivities. Talk about a downer! It's hard to imagine a less user-friendly text for Christmas Christians than Jesus' prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem:

“Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants.” People “will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away

as captives.” There will be “signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars,” and people will “faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world.”

Good grief, what a place to begin falalalala and all of that. Why not start with something nicer, something about building up instead of tearing down or about someone being born instead of people falling by the edge of the sword? This isn't the sort of thing people want to hear in the midst of the holly and the ivy. You preachers, take away your ominous signs and portents and give us our silver bells instead.

And that's how Advent gets off to an awkward start in many churches, assuming it gets started at all. It didn't in the Baptist church in which I grew up; Advent was one of those Catholic-sounding high-church inventions of which we Baptists were pretty suspicious, so we left the candles and wreaths and those little calendars with their open-and-shut windows to the Lutherans.

But Advent isn't, in the church's tradition, at least, primarily about cozying up to Christmas, which is why our reading from Luke comes from nearer the end of that gospel than its beginning. The season of Advent preserves for us one of the most ancient and important strands of Christian belief, which is that Jesus Christ will come to earth again. Not as a baby – been, there, done that – but as, as the New Creed of the United Church of Canada puts it, “our judge and our hope.”

Jesus Christ, our judge and our hope. That ancient and important part of Christian belief – one of the cornerstones of New Testament thought – has become largely a relic for us left-of-the-theological-center types. All of that end-of-the-world stuff we are more than happy to leave to those who seem to find some peculiar pleasure in connecting the dots of current events with bits and pieces of Scripture that speak of the end of time. And today's reading from Luke is one of those bits.

It's a bit that's found also in Matthew and in Mark, and those sayings or stories that appear in all three of the synoptic gospels – those gospels that can be read together or side-by-side, which is what synoptic means – we tend to pay attention to those. When all three of the synoptic evangelists preserve one of Jesus' teachings, we know that it was important for more than one of the earliest Christian communities that gave us the gospels. And Jesus' words about the coming of the Human One at the end of time were vitally important to

his first followers.

Jesus and his followers believed that they were living at the end of the age – the end of this world as we know it – and the question for them as for everyone before and since, including us, is, Is this broken and suffering world what will be there at the end? Is the wicked and unjust state of the present world the best the world will ever be? Is this all that we can hope for and believe in?

That's the question that's confronted every religious person, in one form or another, since the beginning of human history, and Jesus and Paul and all the rest of the writers of the New Testament and most thinkers in the Christian tradition have most emphatically answered that question with a resounding no.

No, this world is not the only world there is, it's not the only world that has to be, and it's not, finally, the world that God intends and will eventually re-create. We who call ourselves Christian inherited from our prophetic ancestors in Judaism the unshakable belief that God has promised something better than this, and that God has a chosen instrument – a people, a Messiah, a church – who can and will, with God's anointing Spirit, help the rest of us create that something better.

Christianity began with the conviction among Jesus' followers that God's promise to change things – to fix things, to sort things out in the person of the Messiah – was being fulfilled before their very eyes in the person of the carpenter, healer, and teacher from Nazareth.

Jesus' way of life – his peculiar teachings, his peculiar way of living, and the peculiar events surrounding his life and death – all of those things convinced his first followers that the promise of God was in the process of being fulfilled, that God's word, spoken through prophets and teachers for more than a thousand years before Jesus, was trustworthy and true. God had promised never to abandon the people chosen to be instruments of God's grace in a graceless world, and Jesus was to his followers the fulfillment of that promise.

Jesus was the embodiment – the incarnation, to use the church's term – of everything God calls us to be. He didn't just *talk* about God's realm; he brought it near. By refusing to live as our dog-eat-dog world tells us to live, Jesus lived God's realm right in the midst of the people who most wanted it and needed it – the poor, the outcast, the marginalized, the rejected. For those with the eyes to see and the

ears to hear, the old world was passing away and a new world – God's world – was just beginning.

That was the lesson Jesus wanted his disciples to learn from the fig tree. He wanted his followers to become as attuned to the signs of God's realm as most of us are to the signs of summer. Jesus wanted his followers then – and he wants his followers now – to use those eyes and ears and hearts and minds and hands and feet that God gives us to discern God's presence already at work among us. To recognize that Jesus began something way back then and way over there that was at once the same as the message of the prophets and at the same time something radically different.

Jesus wanted his followers then and his followers now to see that every chosen people – chosen Christians no less than chosen Jews – can lose their way in the world's entangling concerns. When we become invested in preserving this life as the world defines it – our buying and selling, our raising up families and our burying our dead, our preserving our way of life and our edging out the competition – when this world, with all its joys and its concerns, its plots and its schemes, its hapless leaders and its busted systems – when this world becomes the standard by which we live, we have lost our way. We are lost, in other words, just like sheep.

That's what Jesus wanted his followers then and now to learn from the fig tree. The fig tree sprouts when summer draws near, and many of us Christians sprout green shoots of discipleship when Christmas puts us in the mood. But for the rest of the year? But for the rest of what we do? But for the rest of our lives beyond the ropes of garland and the smell of fir? Do we sense the nearness of God's realm when we've packed up the creche and taken down the greenery? And, more to the point, are the shoots we sprouted in December bearing fruit in June or July or October?

Jesus Christ does not ask us to fret ourselves or pester our neighbors about his return. He asks us, rather, to follow him now on the path he laid out for us in his life and teachings. He has always asked his followers not to speculate about God's realm, not to argue about God's realm, not to try to prove the existence of God's realm, but to *live* God's realm – right here, right now, in the midst of a world that so desperately needs it.

We've seen all we need to see to know what that realm looks like, and we've been given all we need to have to know what living

that realm feels like. God has given us the gift of love incarnate – God's very own self as one of us – to prove to us that it can be done, that living God's realm in the midst of a fallen and broken world is not the impossible fantasy of a deluded dreamer. That's what cynics believe.

Christians believe differently. We believe in God, not in ourselves or in our neighbors or in history. We believe that love, not hate, ultimately wins. We believe that persuasion, not force, is the way to move forward. We believe in abundance, not scarcity, as a global economy. We believe in trust, not fear, as foreign and domestic policy. We believe in cooperation, not competition, as the path to prosperity. We believe that we and the earth both belong to God, and that neither belongs to us. We believe that the point is to play, not to win, and that how we play matters a great deal more than whether we win.

Because we believe, finally, that God has already won. We believe that God's victory over sin and suffering and decay and death and everything else that would separate us from the love of God – that victory has already begun. It's not finished – Lord knows it's not finished – but it most definitely has begun.

And now, in Advent, we wait. Patiently, and with eager longing, we wait. Having felt the nearness of the realm of God, we put forth our shoots, like the fig tree, and we wait for the bearing of God's abundant fruit in us and around us and through us.

“Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ.”