

Jesus Curses the Fig Tree
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
February 5, 2023 PM Sermon
Reverend Peter Jonker
Matthew 21:18-22

There are at least two sermons in these four verses. One of those sermons is on the power of faith. One of those sermons would explore what Jesus could possibly mean when he says, “If you have enough faith, you can make mountains go swimming.” That is a saying that deserves at least 20 minutes of reflection, but I am not going to preach that sermon this evening. I’m going to preach the other sermon. The sermon that arises out of the strange and frightening curse Jesus levels on the fig tree. It’s the only time in Jesus’ entire ministry that he curses anyone or anything, and it’s scary. This is not how we picture Jesus acting: zapping things so that they wither, especially when the victim is an apparently innocent tree. If Jesus zapped a hypocritical sinner, that would be one thing, but this seems like a poor innocent plant just trying to carve out a life for itself along the dry road from Bethany to Jerusalem.

The story is made all the harder because it wasn’t even the season for figs. It was in the spring, just before Passover. Sometimes you can find early figs on a fig tree in springtime, but that’s far from guaranteed. So although it might have been disappointing not to find anything to eat on the tree, it was definitely not surprising. So, why the curse? Is Jesus having a temper tantrum? Is this a gratuitous display of his power? People have asked hard questions about this strange incident.

I do not think Jesus is throwing a temper tantrum or acting out of spite. I think there is something much deeper going on here, and I would like to try to explain it to you. But to do that, I need to take you on a walk in the woods. I want to take your eyes off the withered fig tree for a moment, and I want take you into the forest of the Bible and stand in front of a few other scriptural trees. Because this fig tree is not alone, it is part of a larger ecosystem. It is part of the garden of God’s grace. There will be 5 trees that we’ll see on our walk today.

The first tree we come to on our walk is a tree in the Garden of Eden. Unfortunately, we can’t get too close to it, we can only view it from a distance. But even from a distance we can see that it is an extraordinarily beautiful tree. It’s unusually healthy, and its leaves are green and full, and on its branches hang the most inviting fruit you will ever see. Just a glimpse of this fruit makes you hungry. It makes your mouth water. It makes your soul water.

It’s not the fruit tree that you’re probably thinking of, the one that got Adam and Eve into all that trouble. That was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. There are two trees in the center of the garden and the one we’re looking at is the tree of life. Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat from the tree of good and evil, but they were allowed to eat from the tree of life. They were allowed to eat that life giving fruit. And, as Genesis 3:22 makes clear, so long as Adam and Eve tasted the fruit of this life-giving tree, they were beyond death. The tree of life was given by God so that all human beings could take and eat and live! But, as you all know, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and were thrown out of the garden, we were cut off from the fruit of this tree. A curse fell upon humankind, and without this God given fruit, we did not live forever, we withered and returned to dust.

We leave behind the beautiful, but tragic tree of life, and continuing our walk in the woods, we come to our second tree, actually it’s a vine. This vine is large and strong and green. It looks as if someone has spent a lot of time nurturing this vine. It’s well kept. Someone has been paying attention to it. This is the vine of God’s people. It is the vine of Israel. Throughout the Old Testament, God’s people are compared to a vine. Psalm 80 makes the comparison, “Lord you transplanted a vine from Egypt, you drove out the nations and planted it.” and Isaiah 5 says: “The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting.”

After humankind was cut off from the good fruit of the tree of life, we needed a new tree. So, God decided that he would find a new way to give fruit to people. He planted a vine in the middle of the hungry world. Abraham was the seedling of this vine, and from his root a whole plant sprung up. God intended this vine to be a blessing. Just as the tree of life bore life-giving fruit for others to eat, so the vine of God’s people was intended to bear fruit that would be a blessing. “I will make your name great so that you will be a blessing,” God tells Abram in Genesis 12. Israel was going to be like the new tree of life, justice and righteousness and

shalom would hang on her branches and the nations would come and eat of this holy fruit. This vine was for the healing of the nations! But as strong and green as this vine might be, as much attention as the gardener seems to have given it, if you look closely, you will notice something interesting about it. There's no fruit. Its branches are green, but they are mostly empty.

Which brings us to the third tree on our walk. And now we're back on the road between Bethany and Jerusalem and we're looking at the withered fig tree on. It took the full blast of Jesus' curse, and so it stands there dead and lifeless. It will clearly never again bear fruit. Looking at it makes us both sad and scared. But now that we've seen the first two trees, we have a better idea why Jesus did what he did that morning. Even though he may have originally approached this tree because he was hungry, Jesus didn't just curse this tree because it didn't give him breakfast. In bringing his curse down on this tree, Jesus is using it as a kind of object lesson. This tree reminds Jesus of the fruitless vine. This tree reminds Jesus of the vine of his people, how he lavished them with attention and grace, how he gave them laws to follow, how he gave them bread and beauty and prophets and prosperity, and still they failed to bear the fruit of blessing for others.

In the Old Testament, God gave repeated warnings to his people about the fruit he expected, and if his laws were not followed, and fruit was not produced, a curse was promised. "I will make my vineyard a waste," declares the Lord, "it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns!" says Isaiah 5. And in Isaiah 34 God says of the disobedient, "All their host shall wither like a leaf on a withering vine, or like fruit withering on a fig tree." And in Deuteronomy God says to his people, if you fail to obey my laws and bear my fruit, "Cursed shall you be! The sky over your head shall be as bronze, and the earth under you iron. The Lord will change the rain of your land into powder, and only dust shall come down upon you from the sky until you are destroyed." Looking at this withered tree we see God's terrible judgment on our unfruitfulness. Looking at this cursed tree we see God's deep frustration with our sin. That's why it's not much fun to look at this tree.

As much as we might like to, we can't move on from this tree too quickly. We don't like to think about God's anger against sin, but we must. For instance, it's important that as we look at this cursed fig tree that we don't just think about Israel. It's tempting to look at this monument to God's anger and think: "Wow. Those naughty Jews, those terrible Pharisees, those terrible scribes, those miserable High Priests! They sure took God for granted. God is sure angry at their fruitlessness." Certainly God was angry at their fruitlessness and the fig tree shows that, but when we look at the fig tree we should also be thinking about our fruitfulness or lack thereof. After all, God has blessed us every bit as richly as the Jews of Jesus' day. We have all received his grace. We have all received his instruction. And in our case we have received it in a context of security, prosperity and freedom. The gardener has poured out attention and grace upon our vine. So, never mind the Pharisees, how's our fruit coming?! Are we as individuals, are we as a community, a tree of life for the people around us?

In preparation for this sermon I spent some time on gardening and horticulture websites about why some trees grow and seem healthy, but still don't bear much fruit. There are a variety of reasons of course. But there were some that were pretty interesting. For instance: If a fruit tree is never pruned it won't bear well. If it just grows wherever it feels like without any restraint or discipline, its fruit will be sparse. Productive fruit trees are ones that have been pruned regularly into a certain shape. All the horticulturalists seem to agree that it's especially important that pruning start early in the life of a tree. Another interesting fact: sometimes a tree doesn't bear well because it has it too good. "Excessively rich soil or heavy fertilization may encourage branch and leaf growth at the expense of fruit production." If things are too good and too easy for the tree, all you will see is leaves and no fruit. In fact, some books will tell you that a tree sometimes needs to be stressed to begin fruit production. Take a hatchet and do a little chopping at the base of a complacent tree and that can help stimulate fruitfulness.

I think that our church, LaGrave, is a fruitful church. We have started and supported multiple ministries in our city. Our members are leaders in multiple areas of society and they bring the light of Christ into the places they lead and work. Nevertheless, as I look at the potential reasons for lack of fruitfulness in real trees, I think the second of those two problems is a danger for us. In normal times the danger we have to watch out for is the complacency that comes from too much fertilization. It's easy for us to get comfortable. And in our comfort it's possible for us to become complacent. That's always the temptation for prosperous churches.

More recently, I think we face a different problem. The last three years have been unusually full of crisis. Covid, the Human sexuality report and other issues have taken up an enormous amount of oxygen. Council has spent much time and even more emotional energy putting out fires. We've all been firefighters instead of fruit growers. All this is time and energy that could have been used for new and fruitful ministry with our youth, with our neighbors, with our own hurting people. It's not good. Our world and our church family are full of hurting souls who need the fruitfulness of God's people. As I reflect on this passage, I hear Jesus calling us beyond these crises to a new season of fruitfulness. I think we are all tired of the crises and we are all ready for a season like that. I feel the Spirit pushing me in this story. Maybe you feel him pushing you too.

It would be a mistake if we stopped our forest tour here in front of the cursed fig tree, feeling nothing but a sense of obligation and duty. Before we get to hung up on God's curse upon disobedience, let's leave behind the scorched fig tree and travel through the woods just a little further. Here we come to another tree. This tree was planted just a week or so after the fig tree withered. It was planted in the ground just outside Jerusalem. This tree is also involved a curse. This tree also involved death. It's the cross. It's the tree of pain. Jesus let himself get nailed to this tree so that he can bear the curse for the world's disobedience. "Jesus Christ redeemed us from the curse by becoming a curse for us. For as it is written: Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree." (Galatians 3:13)

A week earlier Jesus cursed the fig tree as an object lesson to show how God felt about our fruitlessness. But you have to believe that when Jesus cursed the fig tree, he wasn't just showing what would happen to human beings if they didn't shape up, he was anticipating what would happen to him just a week later. Standing in front of that withered tree we thought that this was a story of terror, the curse was terrible, we are afraid of Jesus and his judgment upon our failures. We thought maybe what Jesus does to the fruit tree shows what he's going to do to us! But now, standing in front of the cross we realize: the withered fig tree doesn't show what's going to happen to us. It shows what is going to happen to him. Throughout Christian history, we have been so uncomfortable with the parable of the fig tree because this innocent creature, this tree, bears the terrible judgment. But that's the point. That's the gospel: This innocent tree bearing the curse points to the innocent one who bears the curse, for us and for our salvation!

Do you know what the most amazing thing is? This tree is our new tree of life! The tree of life has been planted again in the midst of creation, and we can come to this tree and we can eat of this tree and we can find life. "Those who eat my body and share my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day!" says Jesus in John 6:54.

One more tree on our tour. We started at the beginning of the Bible in the garden, it's only fitting that we conclude at the end in Revelation 22 in the Holy city. Let John describe the plant we see there: "The angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kind of fruits, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." And then the line that ties all the trees together: And no longer will there be any curse" Alleluia. Amen. ©Rev. Peter Jonker