

## Burning Bush, Fig Leaves & Fig Trees

**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent** – Cycle C – 24 March 2019

**Readings:** Ex 3:1-8a, 13-15; 1 Cor 10:1-6,10-12; Lk 13:1-9

*“Give me time to dig round it and manure it; it may bear fruit next year” (Lk)*

### Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The burning bush of the first reading from Exodus chapter 3, which narrates the call of Moses, can be used as a powerful symbol of the God—of our ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—who has “*come down* to deliver” his people since he has “*seen* their affliction” and “*heard* their cry” and “*know* their sufferings” and will “*bring them out* of the hands of the Egyptians” towards the Promised Land. Note the many active verbs that reveal God’s nearness to people and eagerness to help them. Indeed, God is near us, loves us, and seeks to ever free us—leading us from slavery and sin towards freedom and salvation. To achieve this end, God uses human means; for, salvation is always a joint venture between God and humankind. Here, God calls Moses, seeks his consent and assures him before sending him out on mission. Noteworthy about the choice of Moses is his shady background as a murderer (Exodus chapter 2) who sees himself as incompetent to lead his people, on the one hand, and unable to face Pharaoh, on the other. Unconvincing though God’s “I AM WHO I AM” (v.14) declaration may sound, it is this very assurance of “AM-NESS” [God’s presence and power] that will not only support Moses, but will be the mainstay of all God’s chosen ones [disciples] down to our own day. In sum, in the first reading we have the motif for the Passover, the Exodus and the Covenant as central to this season of Lent, which calls each one to ‘pass over’ from all forms of slavery to freedom.
2. Today’s gospel passage opens up with Jesus mentioning two historical events—details of which were known to many people of his time. First, there was talk of Pilate ordering the execution of some Galileans while they were offering sacrifice in the temple since they were guilty of some rebellious activity against the Roman government. Second, some eighteen construction workers perished when a tower at Siloam collapsed, crushing them. Supporting these tragedies was the widespread belief among the Jews of Jesus’ day that God punished sinners and rewarded good people. A ‘tit for tat’ retribution theory or karma-like theory is what we often hold—very often adopting a holier-than-thou attitude—believing that we are better than others. This is precisely what Jesus lays bare and confronts with a direct question: “Do you think that they [those who perished] were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?” (v.4). Then, directly calling for his hearers’ repentance and turnaround, he says: “Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did!”
3. As a parallel to the burning bush [God] of the first reading, we can reflect on the deeper meaning of the parable of the barren fig tree [human beings]. Figs, fig leaves and fig trees are very potent symbols in scripture. First, in negative nuance, the fig tree appears as archetype of Adam and Eve’s sin (Genesis ch. 3), when their ‘fall’ from innocence and grace is depicted as their “nakedness” sought to be covered up before God with fig leaves (Gen 3:7). Second, in positive note, figs and fig trees were important fruits and trees for their sweetness of taste and protective shade, respectively. Third, although at times fig trees

could be unfruitful (see Mt 21:19-21), they were seen as signs of peace, prosperity and new age: “In that day each of you will invite his neighbour to sit under his vine and *fig tree*” (Zech 3:10; Mic 4:4). In today’s parable, the fig tree is planted in a vineyard, which was the finest place for fig trees to grow. If a fig tree couldn’t grow there, it couldn’t grow anywhere! So, even when it does not bear fruit and is in danger of being cut down, the gardener (here, Jesus) intervenes and says, “Give it one more year . . . . Give me time to dig round it and manure it; it *may* bear fruit.” God gives us a second chance!

**Linking the Second Reading to the theme of Repentance and Salvation:** The second reading is written when the community at Corinth mistakenly believes that by their baptism and celebrating the Eucharist, they automatically earn salvation. Paul refers to the Exodus and compares baptism and Eucharist to the two events when they passed through the cloud and were miraculously nourished with manna and water, respectively. He adds, “God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness” (v.5). Thus, Paul—echoing the point of Jesus in the gospel—cautions the Corinthians about their spiritual complacency and holier-than-thou attitude. Moreover, he exhorts them to *be* more and *do* more than merely depending on their reception of sacraments for salvation: “So, if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall!”

**Linking of the Psalm:** “The Lord is compassion and love” proclaims the refrain of the responsorial psalm (103), extolling the wonders wrought by God through Moses. Furthermore, God “forgives all your guilt, heals all your ills and crowns you with love and compassion.” This psalm sung by Israel about the Exodus becomes a hymn of the Christian community celebrating Jesus’ death and resurrection. Through Christ’s death and resurrection, our sins are forgiven and we are saved.

### **Three Current Concerns:**

**Holy Spirit Atheism:** Daniel P. Horan opines in *The National Catholic Reporter* [March 20, 2019]: “The Church is suffering from ‘*Holy Spirit Atheism*’ . . . . The ongoing presence and action of the Holy Spirit should be the founding principle of how we think of the church. But the actions of many church leaders and ordinary Christians alike suggests instead an attitude of ‘it’s all up to me’.” Moses and the prophets depended totally on God, The Great “I AM”. On whom do I depend to lead my people and stand before today’s pharaohs?

**Second Chance Denial:** Moses, the fugitive-murderer; David, the adulterer-murderer; Peter, the boastful-denier; Paul, proud persecutor; and so many of us, disciples, were/are given not only a second chance like the fig-tree, but innumerable chances for repentance and return. Mindful that I/We have been given many, many chances before, how merciful, forgiving and compassionate am I/are We towards others?

**Fig Leaf Coverups:** “The wo/man who thinks s/he is safe and standing must be careful that s/he does not fall!” warns Paul. Where or Who is my/your security? Beware of false securities! Desist from weak anchoring! Stop the blame-game! We can only turn and re-turn, time and again, to God alone. So, let’s take off our sandals and approach the burning bush asking God’s fiery Spirit to enkindle us anew. Also, let’s divest ourselves of all our ‘fig leaves’ and come in our nakedness to God. God knows us and will help us to bear fruit abundantly.

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