

“Fig Tree Faith”
Luke 21:25-36

The Gospel of Luke is the Gospel of Parables. In Luke 21 Jesus gives us the Parable of the Budding Fig Tree. This parable of hope is a message of the wisdom of waiting and being prepared. This is a parable of joy. Jesus says, “Look at the fig tree”, pay attention to, study it and learn deep peace and wisdom from it. The poet Mary Oliver once wrote a poem she called ENTERING THE KINGDOM:

The dream of my life
Is to lie down by a slow river
And stare at the light in the trees—
To learn something by being nothing
A little while but the rich
Lens of attention.

First, those who first heard these parables understood the plain language that he used. There was no hidden meaning to suss out. There were no disguised code words that when interpreted carefully would reveal a conspiracy or a secret kernel of a great truth or offer an exact timetable for the Second Coming. Every person in history who has predicted an exact date for the final return of Christ has been wrong, so it would behoove believers to live in expectation of Christ’s return as wars and natural disasters pile up, but also to live in humility.

As the Bible tells us, figs have been around since the very beginning. After taking bites out of the forbidden fruit, possibly an apple, or some say a pomegranate, when Adam and Eve suddenly acquired the knowledge that they were naked and covered themselves with the leaves of the fig tree. If they were that knowledgeable I wonder why they didn’t use a banana leaf instead because a fig leaf is about the size of a piece of printer paper!

Second, fig trees take 3 to 5 years to produce fruit. This means waiting and watching. This means patience. This means working the soil and caring for the tree during the fruitless years.

In his book *The Fellowship of the Ring*, J.R.R. Tolkien places these words in the mouth of the wizard Gandalf as a commentary on how to live in the midst of change and uncertainty and even fruitless years:

"I wish it need not have happened in my time," said Frodo.

"So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

Arborists tell us that the best time to plant fig trees is in autumn, between September and November, so that the tree can establish roots before cold weather sets in. However, you can also plant in the early spring. Fig trees should be pruned in winter each year to keep their growth in check, and to remove any dead, damaged or diseased material. This should be done while the tree is dormant, over the winter months.

And this leads me to the third thing that we learn when we observe the fig tree—**Advent is a good time for us to prune ourselves.** It is a good time to get ready to welcome once again our real savior, Jesus the Christ. It is time to shed ourselves of thinking about and being consumed by politics and elections. It is time to realize and embrace that we are God's elect. It is time to cut away any unfruitful and life sucking branches that drain us of joy and hope.

"The kingdom of God is near," Jesus tells us through Luke 21. Near in time. He's coming soon! Be on guard! Be alert! But also, near in location. God is among us, within our lives, our hearts, our communities. See through the lens of attention the signs of God at work among and within us, so we will recognize Christ when he appears on the horizon.

Have you ever participated in a group project or an organization where the goal was unclear? Where efforts were frustrated because people were working at odds with one another, each going in the direction they thought best, each interpreting the group's goal in light of their own perspective or personal agenda? Lacking a clear focus, a common mission is the way many great efforts and organizations fail.

The goal of Advent is clear — Christ is coming, and we need to prepare ourselves for his disruptive, world-changing arrival. Having a better understanding and a clearer picture of what Christ is bringing, the kind of world he will create among us, will help us in our preparation and strengthen us for the present work.

It is time to abandon theologies of fear... How is it that some churches and religious traditions can take the words of Jesus and twist them into messages of fear and gloom?

The church of my youth was laser focused upon finding hidden messages in the Bible, messages of fear and foreboding. In the church of my youth the fig tree was not just a fig tree, but a sign of the contemporary Nation of Israel founded in 1948. In the church of my youth this meant a ticking time clock for the Rapture of the Church and the Second Coming of Jesus for all the Bible believing Christians with everyone else left behind for the Tribulation. You tell me, that does sound like Good News?

The message of Jesus here in Luke 21 is not this. Fig tree faith is not predicting future events. It is rather to say as the fig tree loses its leaves each winter but regains them in the spring, so it is that Jesus is available to us through seasons of dying off and new growth. We need to watch and work the ground of the fig tree until fruit comes.

The image of the fig tree does indeed used to by Jesus as he speaks not of his first, but of his anticipated second coming at the end of the age. And we're told not just to prepare, but to beware.

Luke wrote this parable with a deep and growing sense that Christian discipleship is a kind of living in between— aware of Jesus, waiting for Jesus, and coming to know this Jesus for whom we wait in the midst of an eventful, unpredictable, even tumultuous world, waiting to stand before him, yet not always knowing where he is.

Vincent van Gogh captures the mood of this Advent text in his most famous painting, *The Starry Night* (1889). The painting exhibits the bold colors that van Gogh is known for and the postimpressionist style that he helped to make famous. He was the son of a Dutch pastor and for a time an evangelist to the poor himself, so he was likely familiar with texts such as this one from Luke 21. The painting depicts an apocalyptic sky. There are swirling clouds in bold yellows and white on deep, dark blue and black. There is a bold and bright yellow moon and very bright stars, described by one art critic as “rockets of burning yellow.” In the background is a small town, with the church steeple as its most prominent feature. In the foreground, a foreboding flamelike image connects earth and sky. Art historians take it to be a cypress tree, which in van Gogh’s time would have been associated with graveyards and mourning.

Just as you can choose to see hope or doom in van Gogh’s “The Starry Night” we can choose hope or doom when we consider the future. The choice is ours. Believe or not, a better world that can break forth at any time. Yes, famine, drought, war, disease, still plague our world, and closer to home people struggle with greed, addiction, mental illness, and misplaced priorities. Yet, Christ’s call to be alert and constantly praying for God’s kingdom to break through into our world is as urgent a call for us this Advent as it ever has been. Our broken and hurting selves and the world need Christ to come, and we must take time this Advent to prepare to receive him with the lens of our attention to his saving presence among us.

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December 1, 2024
The First Sunday of Advent