

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Place a bible, lighted candle, and a bowl of water on a table in the midst of your group.

**LEADER:** Bless God, all my being. Let my whole life bless the One who causes all to be.

**ALL: Gardener God, cultivate new life in us.**

**LEADER:** Our God forgives our wrongs and mends our lives. Our God rescues us from death and heals us with compassion.

**ALL: Gardener God, cultivate new life in us.**

**LEADER:** Our God secures justice and the rights of the oppressed.

**ALL: Gardener God, cultivate new life in us.**

**LEADER:** Merciful and gracious is the Holy One, slow to anger and abounding in kindness.

**ALL: High as the heavens are above the earth, even higher are God's hopes for all of us who return God's love with our own.**

This summer, six years after my sister and her husband planted a Honeycrisp apple tree in their yard, the tree produced two of the sweet, crunchy apples. Is the soil the problem? Maybe too little sunlight or too few bees to pollinate the blossoms? What will this year's crop bring?

The fig tree in Sunday's gospel has produced no fruit.

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# SUNDAY

## by SUNDAY

The owner wants to cut it down. The gardener wants to fertilize it another year.

In Israel a fig tree is as common as an apple tree. A fig tree and a grape vine—every family should have one. Ripe figs are sweet and wonderful. But what to do with a tree that bears no fruit?

The season of Lent invites us to take the question personally. What to do with those of us who bear no fruit in the world?

Our fruit can be unique to each of us. Family is the circle where most of us take root, blossom, and bear fruit in the love and support we give to one another. College classes involve us in coming through on group projects, listening and learning from others, and articulating our own experience and thoughts. Curiosity and creativity lead us to imagine ending hunger, fairer elections, healthy prenatal care worldwide, a business of one's own.

We are learning Earth cannot support our western lifestyle. We are endangering future generations.

Our city has new waste containers to help us recycle. We can recycle plastics and paper. We can compost our potato peels and apple cores. Every time I take another sack of food waste to the bin, I recommit to less waste. It's a contemporary call to fasting.

I have to waste less food, grow some of my own, recycle and repurpose, walk more, drive less, take the bus and train. Maybe keeping track of what I contribute to our landfills will help me change my buying habits.

● **What is a practical way you want to bear fruit in our world?**



**Sunday Readings:** Exodus 3.1-8, 13-15,  
1 Corinthians 10.1-6, 10-12, Luke 13.1-9

# GOSPEL

## Let me care for this tree one more year.



**NARRATOR:** Some people told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate mixed with their sacrifices.

**JESUS 1:** Do you think these Galileans were the greatest sinners in Galilee because they suffered such things? By no means! But I tell you, unless you repent, you will all perish, too.

**JESUS 2:** Or, take those eighteen in Siloam whom a tower fell on and killed. Do you think they were greater sinners than other inhabitants of Jerusalem? Not at all. But I tell you, unless you repent, you will all perish, too.

**NARRATOR:** Then Jesus spoke this parable.

**JESUS:** A man had a fig tree that had been planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it but found none. He said to the gardener:

**MAN:** Look here! For three years now I have come looking for figs on this tree and found none. Cut it down. Why should it take up space?

**GARDENER:** Sir, leave it one more year while I hoe around it and manure it. Perhaps then it will bear figs. If not, it shall be cut down.  
Luke 13.1-9

or one lost coin as reason to celebrate (15.7). He commands his disciples to preach conversion to all nations (24.37).

Luke makes Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem more than a geographical move. Our real journeys travel an interior landscape, the turning of the whole heart toward God.

- What did it mean to you to be signed with ashes as Lent began?
- What fruit do you long to bear forth in your life? How can you fertilize these hopes?
- What do you need a third chance to accomplish?

At the beginning of Sunday's gospel Jesus refutes the common belief of his time (and sometimes ours) that tragedies are punishment for sin. In this theology, God rewards good people with prosperity and punishes evil with tragedy and poverty. Asking why bad things happen to good people is a question that arises out of this reward and punishment theology.

The Galileans violently massacred by Pontius Pilate for taking part in the insurrection against him were no better or worse than others, according to Jesus. Likewise, the 18 on whom a tower fell in Jerusalem were like everyone else. Neither human violence nor natural violence is divine punishment.

## Jesus calls us to flourish and be fruitful.

Jesus sets out on his way to Jerusalem after the transfiguration. For ten chapters from 9.51 to 19.28, Luke's gospel follows Jesus on this journey—his exodus or going forth, on which his disciples then and we now accompany him.

These ten chapters include many of the stories and parables only Luke tells: the good Samaritan, the rich fool who dies right after building bigger granaries to store his crops, the parable of the fig tree (this Sunday's gospel), the prodigal son (next Sunday's gospel), the rich man and the beggar Lazarus. In these teachings Jesus asks conversion of heart,

care of every neighbor, sharing of plenty, and a fruitfulness that nourishes others.

*Metanoia* (*met-uh-NOY-yah*) is the Greek word for conversion, a turning from complacency and a turning toward God. *Metanoia* is John the Baptist's message when he insists one's ancestry alone is not salvation; each must commit one's self to God and neighbor (3.3-8).

Jesus stands with sinners at his baptism and explains to the scribes and Pharisees who criticize him for eating and drinking with tax collectors, "I have not come to call the righteous to a change of heart (*metanoia*) but sinners" (5.32). Jesus sees finding one lost sheep

## Moses encounters God.

The sight of a bush burning intrigues Moses and draws him closer, yet he hides his face. As Moses meets and speaks with God, he experiences both fascination and fear.

### A burning bush.

Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian. As he led the flock across the desert, he came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There an angel of God appeared to him in fire flaming out of a bush. As he looked on, he was surprised to see that the bush, though on fire, was not consumed. So Moses decided, "I must go over to look at this remarkable sight, and see why the bush is not burned."

When God saw Moses coming over to look more closely, God called out to him from the bush, "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Here I am." God said, "Come no nearer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Hagar, and Sarah; the God of Isaac and Rebecca; the God of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel."

Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. But the Holy One said, "I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore, I have come down to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians and lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey."

"But," said Moses to God, "when I go to the Israelites

The gospel emphasizes mercy, growth, turning toward God. The gardener argues for fertilizing the tree another year. Who likes to cut down a tree? If we think of the gardener as God, then God is nurturing, caring more about another chance for the tree to bear fruit than about threatening to cut it down. If we think of the tree as ourselves or our children, who doesn't need or won't give another chance to grow?

In the Old Testament steadfast, generative love is God's signature characteristic. Sunday's responsorial psalm provides one of the most famous descriptions of God: "Merciful and gracious is the Holy One, slow to anger and abounding in kindness" (103.8).

Mercy lives visibly in Jesus. As we journey with Jesus to Jerusalem this Lent, Sunday's gospel calls us to cultivate our capacity to show mercy, to love and care for one another.

● What feelings do you experience when you hear or see reports of tragedies?

● When has someone's showing you mercy made a positive difference?

The parable of the fig tree reveals God's hope and compassion for people. The gardener, who cares for each tree, pleads for more time and more care. Leave it for another year. A little loosening and manuring of the soil, a little more nourishment, and maybe it will bear fruit.

A friend enjoys getting older and observes, "I'm not right as much as I used to be." Our daily interactions cultivate conversion. Like the gardener we nourish and encourage one another. Listening to others can cultivate the fruit of compassion or courage or insight. Other believers may freshen our commitments. As humans, we have the gifts of mind and heart to discern what Jesus asks of us.

● What or whom will you give one more chance to bear fruit in your life? What special care will this require?

● In what ways are you like the owner of the fig tree? In what ways like the gardener?

● Create your own parable about giving third chances. Draw on your work life or family interests.

● What questions or doubts about God are you living with?



and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' if they ask me, 'What is this God's name?' what am I to tell them?"

God replied, "I am who causes to be." Then God added, "This is what you shall tell the Israelites: I AM sent me to you."

God spoke further to Moses, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites: The Holy One, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, the God of Isaac and Rebecca, the God of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel has sent me to you. This is my name forever; this is my title for all generations."

Exodus 3.1-8,13-15

**T**he bush, burning yet not consumed, preserves a paradox as an image of the holy. Fire suggests power and passion. What heats us up connects with our deepest passions and commitments. Fire both renews and destroys.

Unlike fire, the energy of the holy does not consume, does not use up and exhaust what it burns. The bush lives, and like the bush Moses survives his encounters with God. In the end his own face shines with the reflected presence of the holy.

Israel's history begins in the groans and outcries to God of the Hebrews enslaved in Egypt. The voice that speaks in the bush reveals a longstanding relationship with Israel's ancestors, identifies



compassionately with the slaves, and seeks their freedom and dignity. God says, "I have seen the misery of my people. I have heard their cry. I have come down to deliver them."

Moses insists that to convince the enslaved Hebrews God has come to save them, he must know God's name. Jewish people to this day regard the divine name Yahweh so holy that they never speak it but instead say *Adonai*. I Am Who Am is a common English translation but carries a static, fixed connotation. In Hebrew the *is* verb has a causative tense that gives the name the more dynamic sense I Am Who Causes to Be.

- When have you realized your life is holy ground?
- In your experience has suffering or happiness more often led you to change your heart and take up a holy purpose in life?

# PRAY

**LEADER:** The sign of the fig tree like the sign of the cross calls us to conversion, to turn from complacency and to turn toward love of God, our neighbor, and ourselves. Let us bless ourselves with water to remember the journey to holiness we began at our baptisms.

*Leader holds the bowl of water for group members to make the Sign of the Cross.*

**LEADER:** The sufferings of Jesus Christ have revealed God's love for us.

**ALL:** Through our service of others may we receive the blessings of that love. Amen.

**LEADER:** We believe that by his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ has destroyed the terror of death forever.

**ALL:** May we be given everlasting life in him. Amen.

**LEADER:** May we follow Christ on our life's journey.

**ALL:** And someday share together in the heavenly Jerusalem. Amen.

**LEADER:** May God continue to bless us all our days.

**ALL:** Let us go in peace to love and serve God. Amen.



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## DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

- Alcoholism and struggles with mental illness can burn out family relationships. Experiences in war can fester in veterans' psyches. What might you or your group do to find, recommend, and publicize trustworthy resources for help?