

Third Sunday in Lent  
Exodus 3:1-15, Psalm 63, Luke 13:1-9  
February 28, 2016  
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Carl Jung, one of the best known and most famous psychologists, once said that deep transformation happens primarily in the presence of images – something like “a picture is worth a thousand words.”

Therefore, this morning, I am going to ask you to create some images of your own. If you are game, first, close your eyes and take a few slow even breaths as you try to relax and empty your mind.

I want you to try to visualize your life initially as a young tree. See yourself as a tree.

It's not necessary, but can you tell what kind of tree you are?

Thinking back now to your growing up years, what kind of soil were you planted in? Was it nutrient rich and moist...or sandy, rocky and dry?

Can you identify a gardener who would have fertilized, watered, pruned and shaped you...or were you left to grow wild and mostly unattended?

Is your tree growing straight up in full sunlight.....or is it overshadowed by larger parent trees that may stunt or slow normal growth?

As an adult tree now, are there any weeds or vines choking off growth?

Are you presently experiencing new growth as in the spring of the year..... or are your branches bare and empty as in the winter?

Are your roots deep and widespread to gather as much ground water as needed? What is most nourishing for you now at this stage in your development?

Are you bearing fruit to feed others and grow more trees like yourself?

You can open your eyes now.

Through the imagery of a tree, we have hopefully done some self-examination, which we are instructed to do in Lent. You probably noticed that two of our Bible readings today featured plants – the burning bush and the fig tree.

The burning bush is in a super-natural state – aflame with the presence of God and yet not consumed. The fig tree is in a natural state of decline or at least hibernation. Either way, it is unproductive and on the verge of being cut down.

Was your tree more like the burning bush or the fig tree?

I suspect we would all want to be more like the burning bush, full of the Holy Spirit and furthering God's plan for God's world. In this instance, the bush is calling Moses to his mission - to rescue a people who have suffered under the oppressive bondage and might of the Egyptians for too long.

As trees or bushes alive to the presence of God, we too have a mission to rescue people who are suffering from any number of overbearing and destructive forces. These can range anywhere from physical, mental or spiritual diminishment and hopelessness, to bleak economic factors, discrimination because of race, religion or gender, or just plain old evil and naked injustice. It is not enough for us to reach our own goals for material and spiritual well-being. God wants us to help everyone reach the place we enjoy as much as possible.

Moses is a great hero and giant of our faith because after enjoying his life as a husband, father and successful rancher for 40 years, he, a little reluctantly, agrees to leave it all behind for another 40 years of leading an unappreciative mass of people to freedom and a new homeland. Knowing that God was with him all the way, of course, made it all remotely possible though never very easy.

On the other hand, if we are more like the fig tree, we hope for sure that it will bounce back with the gardener's rehab course of loosening up the hard-packed dirt and shoveling in some enriched animal waste. We all want to bear fruit, and we hope God's patience never runs out with us. Turning more and more to God is our only hope.

We might say that our two readings, both with plants, represent stories of justice on the one hand and mercy on the other. In Exodus, God is beginning the process for exacting much overdue justice upon the cruel and domineering Egyptians.

In the parable of the fig tree, God is extending mercy to a tree that probably should have been cut down long ago.

Certain Jewish rabbis explained that God's justice and mercy were conferred on the world like a king with two empty containers. The king said, "If I put hot water into them, they will crack; if I put cold water into them, they will contract."

So what did the king do? He mixed the hot with the cold, and the containers endured.

God, according to the rabbis, said, "If I create the world only with mercy, people will feel free to sin as much as they want. But if I create it only with the attribute of strict justice, how could the world survive? Behold, I will create it with both attributes, would that it might endure!"

Some of us are more law-and-order oriented, while others of us are more forgiving. It probably depends mostly on how we were raised. The world needs both.

We started imagining ourselves as trees. We end by examining our hearts – too hard, too soft, or somewhere in between? Jesus exhibited both perfect justice and perfect mercy as needed. Pray that we may have his heart. AMEN.