

3rd Sunday in Lent

Scriptures: Exodus 3:1-15, Psalm 63:1-8, 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, Luke 13:1-9

The Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa

March 23, 2025

*“O God, you are my God, eagerly I seek you;
My soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you,
...For you have been my helper,
And under the shadow of your wings I will rejoice.”*

I am glad that Psalm 63 we heard today has “wings” in it. It echoes the Gospel from last week where Jesus proclaims, “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing?” To the psalmist and to Jesus, we are like eaglets, like those of Shadow and Jackie, two nesting bald eagles on Bear Lake I see in a webcam. The nest comes alive with snow-covered mama or papa taking turns protecting their offspring from the cold, bringing food to eat. The image of young ones hungry and growing, is a holy nativity to which the season of Lent invites us.

For today we come to our “holy place,” this “nest,” hungry for God’s protection, mercy and grace, for we are like the fig tree in today’s Gospel, well-planted, fed and watered, yet not bearing the fruit for which we are created. We are created for love, but our love is not growing—the love that Jesus calls us to in our Baptismal vows —“to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.”

There are many signs of fruitlessness around us. I, for one, am easily distracted and short-tempered these days blown by the fierce winds of fear, grief, anger or chaos. We may wonder what school will be like for children with the current reorganization in Santa Rosa. We may wonder: will there be sufficient, effective vaccines for the next epidemic, will we be able to afford health care, will Social Security be there for the disabled and retirement, will freedom of speech or expression for academic, medical and scientific inquiry be protected, will we have a free press and free and fair elections in 2026, or, will the balance of powers prescribed by the Constitution secure the will of “we the people?” These and other tough questions make it hard to focus, easy to latch onto news that confirms our beliefs and cringe at the news that doesn’t. I find myself distracted like Martha in the Gospel by “many things,” one of them with the name, “Doomscrolling.” It’s

hard to be ourselves when it feels like we're in a foreign land and don't speak the language or understand the customs.

In this community, today, the Lenten scriptures bring me hope. In the Old English, the word Lent meant "spring," as in the season of spring, which, coinciding in the Northern Hemisphere with preparations for Easter, was soon associated with our liturgical season of Lent. As a gardener, spring always brings me hope. I have hope for a riot of flowers and herbs as I decide what seeds to plant. I find hope in bees already swarming at rosemary and manzanita blooms, in imagining butterflies returning to zinnias and cosmos. I'm seeing in my mind's eye the doves building their nest again in the wild roses growing profusely near the back fence.

We have an apple tree that may have once been as pitiful as the tree in today's Gospel. "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came looking for fruit on it and found none." Just before this story, Jesus wanders and calls the people to pray fervently, to join his mission of love, to banish greed and wickedness, to live with integrity not hypocrisy, and to sell their possessions and give the money to the poor. He doesn't see this happening. The gardener pleads with the tree's owner, "let it alone for one more year until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit, well and good, but if not, you can cut it down." Jesus is talking about the fruit of the human spirit, the fruit of love.

The fig tree can be many things like our schools, our city, our nation, the world order, or just you and me. Reading this in Lent, let's think about this personally. If the fig tree is you and me, what could Jesus possibly mean by putting "manure" on us? Lord, have mercy! You and I have probably had enough of the manure of "bad things that happen to good people"—loss of an elementary or middle school, loss of a loved one, disrespect or exclusion from a community, poverty, illness, injustice, loss of a way of life. But in Jesus's story, I think the manure is a different kind. I think it is up to us. It's the moral accountability we welcome from the patient gardener, Jesus, who knows us each by name, forgives us our sins, and loves us unconditionally. Lenten manure is our repentance, and our fruit is love.

For me, in 2025, repentance means tough questions, the tough questions you and I freely choose to ask ourselves about what we have done or left undone—questions like are we complicit with an ungodly sacrifice of humanitarian aid here and abroad? Are we complicit with the abrogation of civil rights, freedom of speech and expression and due process? Are we complicit with defiance of international law? God's laws are clear. We recited many of them together at the beginning of this service. Violating any one is immoral no matter what end is used to justify

breaking it. In Christ, the ends don't justify ungodly means. In Jesus the ends and the means are identical—heal the broken hearted, mercy on sinners, respect and inclusion of all people, welcome the stranger, protect the vulnerable, justice for all, speak the truth, reconciliation of enemies, in a word, love. Yes, Jesus overturned the Temple's tables of trade; he threw them down. It was non-violent symbolic resistance to the worship of greed and power. Jesus sacrificed his life that we would understand God's just way of love.

The manure we freely accept this Lent may be prompted by many things—maybe our own failure to thrive in body, mind or spirit. It may be prompted by our daily witness to a flood of human suffering and injustice felt by millions here and abroad. It may be prompted by our witness of violent words and deeds, by the lack of governmental transparency or the abuse of power. For me, repentance means asking tough questions ABOUT ME like:

What illusion do I need to let die?
What reality do I need to accept?
What gives me strength?
What are my gifts?
What people do I need in my life?
What do I need to learn?
How do I pray?

We don't have to ask these questions alone. Moses did not lead an entire enslaved nation out of Egypt by himself. When God charged him, "Come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites out of Egypt," Moses replies, as we might, "Who am I that I should?" [fill in the blank]. But God offers assurance, "I will be with you, and this shall be a sign for you that it is I who sent you, when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." Worship. Remember when God said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." God humbled Moses (Take off your shoes!), and Moses retained his vulnerability through his leadership, turning to God in prayer before every challenge.

Moses needed humility before God. He also needed his people's trust in God, their willingness to respect God's laws and ask tough questions of themselves. After all, they had to take risks and sacrifice cherished ways of living to obtain their freedom. The chaos of that time could have led to the distress of polarization, spitefulness, cowardice and indecency (it did in some measure), but through communal prayer and their sacred community of relationships, God transformed

chaos into positive stress (“eustress”) that motivated them, helped them focus. It strengthened them to assume responsibilities of caring for one another in the wilderness, so all would be free. And God and the people held Moses accountable. He did not become another Pharaoh.

My brothers and sisters, we too face big questions as they did—existential questions about right and wrong (not “right and left”), freedom and responsibility, democracy or authoritarianism, security and risk, and yes, life and death. There are no easy answers. How do we become a strong and healthy tree, able to bear the fruits of justice, truth and love?

I recently read a piece “The grace of identity” by an English priest Samuel Wells, Vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London. He reminds us that who we are is not fixed at birth. Our identity is “negotiable and fluid,” depending on self-discovery as we try and fail, as we explore new ways of being; this is self-work. Identity is also formed in relationships we choose such as Baptism into Christ, belonging to a Eucharistic community, volunteering in the community, or participating in organized peaceable resistance. Jesus’ identity and the identity of his disciples were formed and strengthened together as they witnessed the injustice and lies of imperialist Romans and patriarchal religious authorities. So too we, in this holy nest of sacred community are transformed, transfigured, and resurrected to grow in love, with God’s help.

Amid what seem like endless bad surprises, we can rejoice that out of the darkness, prophets rise to announce the sovereignty, justice and peace God yearns for our nation and the global community. God’s love is moving over the earth inviting us to be brave as we step into the foreign lands of distrust, enmity and suffering to create holy places, nests, to grow as one community under the shadow of God’s wings. Mennonite pastor Melissa Florer-Bixler writes, “When the acts of the state contradict our allegiance to Jesus Christ, Christians have made our resistance public and clear. We cannot be governed according to the state’s will. We are already governed by the law of love.”

Every evening this Lent I am praying Compline, whether in the Book of Common Prayer or the phone app “Common Prayer” from the Church of England. Its nest of safety and nurture gives me hope. I end with its closing prayer:

May God bless us,
That in us may be found love and humility,
Obedience and thanksgiving,

Discipline, gentleness and peace. Amen.