

Third Weekend in Lent (C/RCL)
Isaiah 55:1-9, 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, Luke 13:1-9
March 23-24, 2019
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I admit it: I have a bias toward flowering plants. I've tried to appreciate philodendron with its shiny leaves, spiky snakeplants that come in gift planters. But my **real** energy is for African violets with their soft pink, purple, white or blue blossoms, kalanchoe with its vibrant orange, red or yellow blooms, Christmas cactus with its unusual pink, red or white flowers, crown of thorns with tiny reddish-orange flowers like drops of blood, even the streptocarpus that Barbara Tillson gave each of us at the women's retreat years ago and occasionally delights with blue trumpet-like flowers.

I also have a few orchids. They were blooming when I received them, and haven't since. The good news is that I haven't killed them in the meantime. Ned suggested I water them by putting 3 ice cubes in each pot every 10 days. The garden center lady told me to immerse the whole pot in water for 3 minutes, every couple weeks.

When one of my houseplants starts to fail, I take it personally and figure I'm doing something wrong. So I fertilize it. Repot it. Move it to another window or room, giving it different sun exposure. Or change my watering schedule. A plant's got to look really ghastly before I'll give up, yank it out by the roots, throw it away, pour the remaining soil into the garden outside. So I identify with the patient, hope-filled gardener in today's Gospel who tells the owner of the vineyard to give the figless fig tree a little more time, another chance, a good dose of fertilizer:

"Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."
(Luke 13:8)

Where there's life, there's hope, and where there's God, there's mercy.

Our second lesson from 1 Corinthians (10:13b) ends with a great promise about God's mercy:

God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

When we're **not** living faithful lives, **not** bearing the fruit of faith-active-in-love, sometimes the reason is that we're living "under the gun" in some way. Our faith is flagging, sagging under the weight of whatever our current life challenge is. In the moment, we feel as if the situation is a test we're in danger of flunking.

Think about your own life. When have **you** feared you were being tested beyond your strength? When has your fear been so great it threatened to overpower your faith? It happens to a lot of us: at points our human weakness makes us forget about God's divine strength: in the immediate wake of a loved one's death, in the heat of a health crisis, in the throes of financial worries generated by unemployment, in the emotional maelstrom of romantic break-up, contentious divorce, fractured friendship, business or personal betrayal.

When have you seen or even **experienced** the suffering of the innocent (brought up in today's Gospel), innocent suffering either far away or very close to home, and asked if there is a God, or if this God is loving, or if our God is really powerful to save? When have you thirsted, hungered, longed for answers that don't come this side of Heaven, for comfort in the midst of unrelenting pain, for peace to calm hellish anxiety? For trust that "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well"?

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So what's "the way out"? We know there's no magical escape hatch from physical or mental illness, from addiction, from under- or unemployment, from death, our own or that of others. People of faith experience as many crises, as many catastrophes, as anyone else. But our Lord offers grace-for-the-day to face them, to endure them. What invitation do we hear in the first reading from Isaiah (55:1)?

*Ho, everyone who thirsts,
 come to the waters;
 and you that have no money,
 come, buy and eat!
 Come, buy wine and milk
 without money and without price.*

For us, the water, the wine, the milk to slake our thirst for the things of Heaven, to strengthen us in the midst of trials, to infuse us with hope in otherwise hopeless situations, to en-**courage** us in the midst of scary times, to fortify our faith when our trust gets shaky, to humble us to admit we are sinners in need of a Savior, **is Word & Sacrament.**

The verse that immediately follows this week's Isaiah reading is this:

*Just as rain and snow descend from the skies
 and don't go back until they've watered the earth,
 Doing their work of making things grow and blossom...
 So will the words that come out of my mouth
 not come back empty-handed.
 They'll do the work I sent them to do,
 they'll complete the assignment I gave them.*
 Isaiah 55:10-11 (*The Message*)

Christians **and** Jews believe that God's Word has the power to change situations, to change people. In our Lutheran lingo, the Word is both **Law & Gospel**. The **Law** isn't just the 10 Commandments; it's all of God's Word that calls us out on our sinfulness, calls us to turn **away from** sin, self, selfishness and **toward** God (which is what repentance means). The **Gospel** isn't just Matthew, Mark, Luke & John's accounts of Jesus' life on earth. It's

whatever in Scripture holds out the offer, the promise of forgiveness and God's mercy, like we find in today's reading from Isaiah 55 (vv. 6-7, *The Message*):

*Seek GOD while he's here to be found,
 pray to him while he's close at hand.
 Let the wicked abandon their way of life
 and the evil their way of thinking.
 Let them come back to GOD, who is merciful,
 come back to our God, who is lavish with forgiveness.*

Even if you're feeling like the leggy, wilting houseplant in danger of being dumped into the dustbin, take heart: where there's life, there's hope, and where there's God, there's mercy.

"Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."
 (Luke 13:8)

God's mercy is endless, but our earthly lives are not. If there are fences to be mended, we should begin today. If there are apologies to be offered, we should voice them today. If we're guilty of self-destructive or selfish behavior, we should stop it today. Remember, we're not on our own. In Holy Baptism, in Holy Communion, we have received the water, the milk, the wine, the bread of God's grace, God's very life within us, God's strength to uphold us. We only need to open our hearts and reach out to accept all that God so mercifully and lovingly offers. Be ready to be surprised at what God can do.

I got back from Scotland and England and discovered that the smallest orchid has shot up a stem with 12 buds. In the fullness of God's time and in the light of God's grace, we can **all** bloom. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham