

**Sermon “Surprised by Life”**  
**Kirk of St James**  
**Sunday March 23, 2025**  
**Rev. Amanda Henderson Bolton**

A number of years ago there was a blue hydrangea plant left over from the easter flowers. Although the plant had dried up and dropped what little it had left on the stem, I couldn't bear the thought of throwing it out, so I planted it beside the other hydrangea bush alongside the manse. While I don't know anything about flowers it stood to reason that if one was thriving there, possibly a second one might. Yet year after year nothing appeared, and I forgot about it. Then a couple years ago, something caught my eye, and there it was—a little bush with three bright blue flowers. I don't know why it took years, and I don't understand why it finally grew that particular year, but it was a wonderful surprise, and each year since it has reappeared with a few more blooms. Life appeared where I had long thought none existed. Somewhere deep in the earth life was happening, even when I thought it wasn't.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote “the early mornings belong to the Church of the risen Christ. At the break of light it remembers the morning on which death and sin lay prostrate in defeat and new life and salvation were given to mankind.” Rachel Held Evans reflecting on this comment wrote in response “This comes as unfortunate news for someone like me who can barely remember who she is at the “break of light,” much less ponder the theological implications of the resurrection...Religious folks have always had it out for us night owls. My book of hours stipulates that morning prayers be said between 4:30 and 7:30 a.m. How I'm supposed to talk to God at an hour in which I cannot even speak to my husband coherently is beyond me.”

However, there is something substantial when it comes to Bonhoeffers' comments about dawn and the resurrection. Many of the world's greatest cathedrals are built with their entrances on the west, and their alters on the east. Ancient graveyards were designed so people

would be buried with their feet toward the rising sun as a sign of hope and with the expectation that when Jesus returns to Jerusalem at the Second Coming, the faithful will rise and look him in the eye. As Evans says, “One can only hope this will happen sometime after 9 o’clock in the morning, eastern standard time.” All joking aside, today’s passage is thought provoking as we continue to ponder the meaning of Lent, and the importance of the resurrection.

While the lectionary passages usually follow in order week to week, they were a little different today, because they actually go back in Luke instead of forward. Last week we heard about Jesus’ deep love and care for Jerusalem despite the fact that it was often viewed as corrupt and broken. Jesus’ deep love for the city and humankind kept him on the road to Jerusalem, even though he knows it will lead to his death. The passage this week tried to incite Jesus to a righteous anger that people hoped would spill over into something more, like rebellion or action against Rome.

While Jesus is with fellow Galileans a report comes to them about others from Galilee who went to present sacrifices at the temple, and while they are there, Pilate has them all killed. Tensions always ran high between Rome and the Israelites in the days leading up the Passover. These actions by Pilate would be looked upon with deep anger. Soldiers had been sent into the sacred temple to kill the people they found there, and not only were they cut down like lambs to the slaughter, but also alongside the sacrificial lambs. This is a violent and reprehensible event, people would have expected Jesus to be angry--outraged even. So, it is shocking that after hearing about this event Jesus turns the conversation around entirely.

Instead of being stirred to anger, Jesus’ comments on the events in the temple, and the death of 18 people at Siloam turns into a conversation about sin and suffering. It was a commonly held belief that sin and suffering were connected; suffering was looked upon as punishment for sin. Whereas if you followed the Torah and were obedient you would be

blessed. Jesus is clearly rejecting this view, and the lesson he draws from the two terrible events is the importance of repentance. Jesus wants people to respond positively to his message of repentance before it is too late. Oftentimes the thought of repentance does not come with a sense of urgency. It is something we may think about from time to time, but there is no real rush--we can always get to it tomorrow. Jesus on the other hand is telling his listeners repentance needs to be at the forefront of their lives. If the events at the temple and Siloam prove anything, it is that nothing in life is guaranteed no matter how good you are, or how obedient you are.

While repentance is in part about contrition, remorse, and genuinely feeling regretful when we act in ways we should not, repentance is also about wanting to do what is right. Often, we focus so much on the guilt and wrongdoing we forget to live into the second part of the definition. The parable of the fig tree demonstrates both these truths of forgiveness and the possibility of newness of life. The first part of the parable is about how the fig tree is not bearing fruit the way it is supposed to. It reflects the apathy and indecision that is widespread among those who hear Jesus' message. The parable is meant to wake them up. The owner keeps checking on the fig tree to no avail. Over three years the tree should have begun to produce its fruit. While the logical response of the gardener should be to uproot the tree and start over, the extravagant nature of the owner allows for an extension. Give it one more year, if fails yet again to produce fruit cut it down, but if in that time it finally flowers and grows tend it and look after it. "Far from offering cheap grace, or forgiveness with no reckoning, the gardener advocates that every chance...be given before a final decision is made."

Jesus is trying to express the urgency of his message. He is calling people to respond before it is too late. While God is merciful there are also no guarantees when it comes to life. So repent, and work to produce good fruit. In many ways the parable of the fig tree is a

beautiful image of a creator who has planted us in love and wants us to thrive. While the better part of Lent is about searching our lives, and our hearts and repentance in the areas where we know we are falling short, it is also about resurrection hope. It's about all the strange ways God brings dead things back to life again. It's about giving up and starting over again. We never know if this particular fig tree ever bears fruit, and that is okay because we live in the constant hope of resurrection. That we are constantly being made new. That even if we have a season where we do not grow or thrive, the reality of repentance and the hope of new life are constantly before us. We never run out of hope with God.

There is a Lenten poem that comes from Jan Richardson that I would like to close with today called *Where the Breath Begins*. It goes like this:

Dry and dry and dry in each direction. Dust dry. Desert dry. Bone dry.

And here in your own heart: dry, the center of your chest  
a bare valley stretching out every way you turn.

Did you think this was where you had come to die?

It's true that you may need to do some crumbling, yes.

That some things you have protected may want to be laid bare, yes.

That you will be asked to let go and let go, yes.

But listen. This is what a desert is for.

If you have come here desolate, if you have come here deflated,  
then thank your lucky stars the desert is where you have landed—  
here where it is hard to hide,

here where it is unwise to rely on your own devices,

here where you will have to look and look again and look close  
to find what refreshment waits to reveal itself to you.

I tell you, though it may be hard to see it now,

this is where your greatest blessing will find you.

I tell you, this is where you will receive your life again.

I tell you, this is where the breath begins.

—Jan Richardson

from *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons*

Let us continue to live and wait both in repentance, and in resurrection hope during this Lenten season.