

# While the Lord May Be Found

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Aaron Billard at*

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What puzzles me about this story that Jesus tells is the arbitrary decision made by the land owner in Jesus' story to simply cut down the fig tree because it hasn't grown any fruit. It's an implied act that says just because this tree isn't able to do what it's supposed to do, I want it gone. Chop it down. Just like that. Three years have gone by. Nothing. The discussion is over. Time to let it go. It's wasting space and good soil.

In our prenatal classes a few years ago, we met a chef by the name of Chris MacAdam, who is also a Cape Bretoner. Chris is the Executive Chef at the Tait House in Shediac. I heard Chris speaking one day about the nutritional value and wonderful flavour of the fig, which he mentioned is a fruit that dates back to biblical times. The way he spoke about it, one could easily see today as to why the fig was such an important part of the ancient world. According to one woman, if you are going to make preserves with figs, use lots of sugar. They are mentioned early in the Bible – in the story of Adam and Eve. They wear fig leaves when they leave the garden, and artists have been using them to cover statues ever since. There is a chapter in the Qur'an named after the fig tree. In Greek mythology, Apollo sends a crow to get some water, but the crow is distracted by a fig tree.

Truth be told, we tend to think about people that way sometimes too. We think about ideas like that. If we don't see immediate results, we are tempted to toss an idea out rather than keep working the soil to see if something can be produced. If someone isn't living up to their potential, we are tempted to let them go. "They're a waste of space." We get so preoccupied with productivity, that we forget what it takes to grow something good. Whether it is a relationship, whether it is a business, whether it is a group, whether it is a work of art, whether it is a friendship, whether it is a church. We want those things to flower.

Actually, Jesus has something against fig trees. In the combined four Gospels, they are the only thing he curses. In a real-life example of the story this morning, Jesus is walking along and he's hungry. He sees a fig tree, but there are only leaves on it. He curses the tree by saying, "May you never bear fruit again" and the tree withers and dies. My friend Karen says that if she could take one thing out of the Bible, it would be that. Why curse the tree? It serves no purpose. I can picture the conversation now, as Peter comes alongside Jesus and says, "Lord, what did you just do? Don't you know that it will upset the vegetarians?" Apparently, there is a sign at the Moncton market that says: "Vegetarian: An ancient word for "Bad Hunter." Guess what they sell?

If there is one part of Christianity that I could change, it would be the notion that only bad things happen to people who do bad things. I've had many conversations by bedsides or in moments of pain in which people wonder why God is doing this, that here must be a reason. Jesus states clearly here: there isn't. Bad things just don't happen to bad people, they happen to good people, too.

Jesus started the debate. He told people that they didn't have a clue how to interpret the present times. The people are coming to Jesus telling him stories about the massacre of a group of people who were innocent. People believed then as many do now that bad things happen to only bad people, and that good people were showered with blessings. Jesus denies that these people died because of who they were. He then sites the tragedy of the collapse of the Tower of Siloam just outside Jerusalem as another case for consideration. Were the eighteen people who were killed in that tragedy worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? (Peter Woods, from, I Am Listening)

In recent times, televangelist Pat Robertson, cut to the quick by saying that Haiti somehow deserved an earthquake because of a pact with the devil. It would be interesting to know how Pat grew up, and the things that shaped his world view. It's hard to challenge that sometimes.

It's not these tragic things, says Jesus, that define the coming or speaking of God. God doesn't send earthquakes to punish people, especially in the case of Haiti of one of the poorest countries in the world. I don't believe in that God. The God I know wouldn't do those things. God would never inflict suffering on a child to teach anyone a lesson. The God I have experienced would not bring a country to its knees just to kick it when it's down.

But in the moments of suffering, we learn. And in those moments, we do see the approach of God, especially when our world is shaking. Which is what I think people are really trying to say. God is in this. God is just not the cause of this. God is sitting beside you. In terms that I know will challenge some, yet I hold firm in my belief because it is the only God I can know, if I am to understand God correctly in terms of

Haiti for example, God is beneath the rubble. We hear it in the voices of the poor in Chile, seeking justice, who wonder why buildings are made of clay in an area prone to earth quakes? Why are new highways devastated therefore blocking delaying aid to the poor? Those are godly questions.

Pastoral theologian Seward Hiltner used to tell about the state-run mental hospital where truly hopeless cases were relegated to a back ward. The psychiatrists and other medical staff avoided this ward, making only the bare minimum of calls and writing off the patients there as unsalvageable. Then a women's group from a local church began, as a matter of compassion, to visit the patients in this hospital. No one bothered to tell them that the patients in the back ward were abandoned cases, so they visited them regularly, bringing flowers, fresh baked cookies, prayer, cheerfulness and mercy. Before long, some of the patients began to respond, a few of them even becoming healthy enough to move to other wards. At one level, this was merely a church group doing what church groups do. At another level, it was a sign of the times. *(Tom Long, from the article "Breaking and Entering")*

Where are the sign of the times in your life? Or in our city and world? Those moments that upend the status quo and change it into something quite remarkable and beautiful. The difficulty is when we become overwhelmed by the pain around us. When our caring becomes incompatible with our ability to help because we are either exhausted, physically, mentally, and spiritually; or our resources have run dry, with constant appeals for them; and even in our own lives when even trying to do a little more feels like a mountain before us. I know all of us feel that way sometimes. At least, I do.

Elie Wiesel, winner of the Nobel Peace prize and survivor of the holocaust wrote, “There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest. The Talmud tells us that by saving a single human being, man can save the world. We may be powerless to open all the jails and free all the prisoners, but by declaring our solidarity with one prisoner, we indict all jailers. None of us is in a position to eliminate war, but it is our obligation to denounce it and expose it in all its hideousness. War leaves no victors, only victims.”

In other words, that one thing you do can have a butterfly effect in our world. The one small act of goodness you do, the one moment of charity, the one hand reached out to help, the small prayer that is said, the casserole that is delivered, the kind letter sent, the beautiful smile given, the cheque that you have written, the friend visited, the time that you took, all have the potential to do what is called “strange attractors” – which is the theory that small changes to situations can produce larger changes down the road. No matter how much we crave order and for the world to stay the way it is, the act of love and goodness that we do can find its way into a greater act in ways we couldn’t have possibly imagined.

“Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near.” While the Lord may be found, we have opportunities every day to affect change in our world. Ours isn’t a faith that is about chopping down; instead, it’s about stepping in and giving something another chance to grow.

I pray this message speaks to a place in your heart this Lent, because I know I’ve needed to hear it myself.