

Old Testament Lesson—Jeremiah 8:8-13

How can you say, "We are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us," when, in fact, the false pen of the scribes has made it into a lie? The wise shall be put to shame, they shall be dismayed and taken; since they have rejected the word of the Lord, what wisdom is in them? Therefore I will give their wives to others and their fields to conquerors, because from the least to the greatest everyone is greedy for unjust gain; from prophet to priest everyone deals falsely. They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace. They acted shamefully, they committed abomination; yet they were not at all ashamed, they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time when I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the Lord. When I wanted to gather them, says the Lord, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them.

New Testament Lesson—Matthew 21:18-22

In the morning, when he returned to the city, he was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing at all on it but leaves. Then he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" And the fig tree withered at once. When the disciples saw it, they were amazed, saying, "How did the fig tree wither at once?" Jesus answered them, "Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, "Be lifted up and thrown into the sea," it will be done. Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive."

I'm telling you...only Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, could go from hangry temper tantrum to, "Let me teach you about the power of prayer" in almost the same breath!

...just an odd and sudden change of direction, don't you think?

Who knows: Maybe he's trying to deflect or distract the disciples—a bit embarrassed (perhaps) by the whole fig tree incident. I mean...whatever motivation we try to imagine Jesus having here, it's still a strange use of divine power. Isn't it?

This (I'm pretty sure) is the only time in the gospels that Christ uses his ability to perform miracles in way that we could arguably call "destructive." No one is healed or fed or exorcised or saved from dangerous weather.

No one's brought back to life or saved from drowning or made whole again. Nothing like what Jesus typically does...

That, to me, is what makes this miracle story exceptional and worth our attention. Jesus's humanity and divinity come together here in a unique way.

Here, in Matthew, Jesus (at least) *appears* to lash out in frustration. And, in so doing, Jesus commits herbicide—phytocide? One of them...

So, we've got just today and next Sunday left in our "Miracles of the Bible" sermon series. It's been fun going through this "sampler platter" of miracles with you these past two

months. I hope you've gained some perspective and maybe encountered these stories in fresh ways—perhaps raised some new questions.

For the gospel writers—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—the miracles are always about more than the spectacle—always about more than the “wow-factor.”

They're meant to teach us something about the world—something about ourselves—and certainly something about God. Miracles are demonstrations that God's Kingdom is coming.

The fancy, supernatural parts that quickly capture our attention are really just the window we peer through to witness a greater truth. We come for the “Good God!” but stay for the good news.

So if that's the case, then, what's Jesus teaching us here? What's he trying to say by cursing some poor tree? Or, is there really *no* point to it?

We all know what it's like to let our frustrations get the best of us—at least temporarily. Maybe you've slammed a few doors over the years? Raised your voice in a way you later regret? Maybe you've shown others exactly what unsportsmanlike conduct looks like—thrown a few helmets or bats or rackets or elbows?

I won't claim to know exactly what Jesus was feeling in this moment. But, have you ever had an overwhelming craving to eat (or inhale) something specific, expected to be satisfied, but then were tragically denied? It's awful!

It's like when you drive somewhere completely out of your way, desperate for that first juicy bite that makes your mouth water something fierce—only to finally pull into the parking lot and gaze in disbelief at the sign that reads: “Closed for renovations.”

Dag nabbit, fiddlesticks, (and other phrases not appropriate for a family broadcast)! Day. Officially. Ruined. Now I'm really hangry. Don't mess with me right now.

We're not used to these kinds of emotions from Jesus. I have to imagine the disciples being pretty taken aback in this moment...

“Um, who's gonna go check on our guy? Anybody? Peter? Nose goes!”

But, wouldn't you know it...Jesus's friends end up doing the most predictable thing. They do the most disciple-y thing they could do. Actually, they do what we'd all probably do...

Their attention is totally captured by what's shiny and flashy: *When the disciples saw it, they were amazed, saying, "How did the fig tree wither at once?"*

They're focused on the miracle. They can't get over the spectacle. And I get it. I'm sure I'd be right there with them—fixated and unable to look away. So let's not be quick to judge them. In fact...Pro tip: When you're reading the gospels, make a habit of going easy on the disciples. Please? Because, in most cases, they represent us and what we would do.

That being said, Jesus's friends don't seem very concerned about the “why” behind the miracle they've witnessed. After all, something like this is unprecedented in Jesus's ministry. To use his divine power to lash out at a living thing...it's way out of character.

And, who knows...maybe that's why the disciples ask, “How?” How did that—uh, what just happened? Maybe they just can't wrap their minds around what they've seen—that the fig tree's sudden death *was* (in fact) a miracle of Christ. How did the fig tree wither just now?

At this point in Matthew's story, they've witnessed dozens of miracles. They know what Jesus is capable of. But this just doesn't jive with what they know. Right?

I mean, Jesus's miracles are encouraging and full of hope. They're intentionally done. They have a deeper meaning behind the act itself—something to learn. But this...How?

Again, we can't know Jesus's heart and mind. I'm afraid that's a one-way street in the opposite direction.

But: Regardless of whether Christ was mad-hungry or lashed out, it's worth pointing out that his actions here are consistent with what he says throughout Matthew's gospel.

In a strange sense, he's actually practicing what he's preaching. It's true. The Jesus of the gospels often talks about discipleship in terms of bearing fruit. Those who follow Christ faithfully will bear fruit in the world. They will produce good works—do good things.

A fig tree that doesn't produce figs isn't doing what it's made to do. A lamp put under a bushel basket makes absolutely no sense. What happens when salt has lost its flavor? It's no longer good for anything, but thrown out and trampled underfoot.

Or imagine a self-proclaimed disciple of Christ who walks right by their cross and refuses to pick it up. That's what a Jesus-follower does—picks up their cross.

If an umbrella gets you wet, then you can't call it an umbrella. Umbrellas are created to keep you dry. In the same way, human beings are created to reflect God's image into the world. And those who choose to be Christ's disciple are called to reflect his love and example—called, in other words, to bear good fruit.

Jesus's response to the disciples' question is telling, I think. It isn't so much an explanation of the miracle as it is a recipe for producing good fruit.

Jesus answered them, "Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it will be done. Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive."

You see: For this miracle worker named Jesus, everything rests on faith. Figs or no figs, it all comes down to trusting in God's power and provision. And so it is with his disciples today.

For us too, my friends, discipleship is rooted in our faith in Christ. We believe. We trust. And the greater our faith—the greater our capacity to bear fruit. The deeper our trust, the better positioned we are to navigate life's inevitable valleys.

The more we practice believing, the more likely we'll be to do the right thing when the right thing is the hardest thing.

Because, without faith, everything withers. If faith is our foundation, then anything is possible. Despite Christ's clever use of hyperbole here, the underlying truth isn't far-fetched at all...

A tried and true and steadfast faith in God empowers us to do marvelous things, my friends! And, as Jesus shows us here, that's true everyday and always—even when we're not in the best headspace.

What a phenomenal, merciful, and joyous miracle it is that God hears our prayers—all our prayers—even those we scream out of anger and frustration.

We may not be able to move that mountain all at once. We can't extinguish all forms of prejudice in one fell swoop. We can't eliminate injustice overnight.

But if we *believe* it's possible—if we *believe* God is who God says God is, then that mountain *can* be moved—bit by bit, rock by rock, prayer by prayer, march by march, protest by protest, reconciling hug by reconciling hug, forgiveness given by forgiveness given.

For there is always good news to be found, Cedar Heights. Always—even on a tree with no figs—even here in this place—even today—even right now—and tomorrow too.

Amen.