

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on March 20, 2022 (3 Lent, Year C)**

Route 31 in Kentucky connects the city of Louisville to Fort Knox. I traveled this road on a regular basis when I was in the Army and Route 31 was nothing if not nondescript. I mostly remember open spaces and fast food joints and used car dealers. But one establishment in particular caught my attention. It was a liquor store placed just outside the county line between dry Bullitt County, where the sale of alcohol was prohibited, and wet Hardin County, where alcohol sales were legal. Driving down Route 31 through the dry county and approaching the wet one, the liquor store's giant neon sign read "Bennie's First Chance." But when you traveled the opposite way on Route 31, through the wet county approaching the dry one, the giant neon sign read "Bennie's Last Chance." A clever marketing ploy that probably served Bennie well over the years.

So how does a liquor store in Kentucky relate to a burning bush and a fig tree? A valid question. But the two stories we heard this morning are also about first chances and last chances. When Moses stumbles upon the oddity of a burning bush that is not consumed with fire, he does a double take. In fact, he rubbernecks. He diverts the flock he's tending, stops, and stares at this unusual sight. Of course the rest is history. God calls to Moses out of the burning bush, Moses hesitates but responds, and then he spends the rest of his life following God and leading God's people to the promised land. But it was in that very moment up on the mountain that Moses received a first chance to serve God.

We, too, are continually offered first chances to serve God. We may not have such astounding encounters with God on a daily basis, but they are all equally dramatic in their own ways. Any encounter with the living God is always dramatic. If we open our eyes to God's presence in the world and in our lives, we see first chances to serve God all day long. Each day brings fresh opportunities to serve God anew. If we allow it to be, the buzzing of our alarm clock acts as a signal calling us to God's service in the world. Each day brings opportunity and hope to live in God's presence, to praise God, to love one another in God's name. And Lent in particular is an entire season dedicated to the first chances of spiritual renewal.

Then there's the fig tree. This isn't one of Jesus' most easily understood parables so a bit of explanation might be helpful. In the story there are three "characters:" the owner of the vineyard, the gardener, and the fig tree. The basic point is that the owner had a fig tree planted three years ago and he hasn't seen a single fig. Not a great return on his investment. So, he tells his gardener to cut it down. Soil is a precious commodity, it's being wasted by this useless fig tree, so get rid of it.

This makes a lot of sense except that the gardener seems to have some sort of sentimental attachment to the tree and asks that the tree be given a year's reprieve. He'll pay more attention to it, throw on some fertilizer, and if it still hasn't produced any figs, *then* he'll cut it down. The fig tree has been given a last chance, a stay of execution.

So what's Jesus talking about here? I don't think he's merely passing on gardening tips, as useful as they might be. Many see this parable in the following light: the owner of the vineyard is God, who has the authority to plant and to uproot lives as God sees fit. The gardener is Jesus, who intercedes on behalf of the fig tree. And the fig tree is seen as God's people in the world. So, through the intercession of Jesus, God has mercy upon us, and offers us a last chance. Despite our sinfulness and our turning away from God and one another, we are offered one last chance to make amends. This doesn't minimize the fact that we will all ultimately be judged by our actions, but it does highlight the merciful nature of God as revealed to us through Jesus Christ.

So, what would it mean to live life as if it was your last chance? Take a moment to see yourself as the fig tree in Jesus' story. What changes would you make to insure that you would bear fruit in the coming year? How would you make the most of this last chance?

But before you answer this, please recognize that you mustn't do all the work alone. Jesus will fertilize you, nurture you, water you, and feed you. You have help in bearing your fruit; you don't have to do it alone. Even though you're down to your last chance, even though the pressure's on to produce or be cut down, you don't have to do all the work by yourself. After all, no tree can bear fruit all by itself. A tree needs sunlight, rain, and good soil. Only with some outside intervention can a tree bear fruit and thrive.

And rest assured that God has given us all the ability to bear fruit. It's part of what it means to be created in the image of God. Sure, we need some pruning every now and then – Lent gives us a great opportunity to think about this. We just have to trust that the gardener, who is Jesus, knows what he's doing. And that with his help, we will indeed bear fruit. With his help, there is no way we *won't* bear fruit. For it is Jesus himself who fertilizes us, nurtures us, waters us, and feeds us.

So, even though we've been given one last chance through the mercy of God, we've also simultaneously been given myriad first chances. Because God offers us a burning bush, an opportunity to serve the Lord, at every turn. We are given countless first chances even in the midst of our last chance. Paradoxical? Maybe. But as we enter more deeply into this season of Lent, we must come face-to-face with the merciful and loving judgment of God that offers us continued first chances, even while acknowledging the gravity of the last chance.

I don't usually offer up a liquor store in Kentucky as a metaphor for God. But Bennie does offer his customers both a first chance and a last chance. God continually offers us first chances in the midst of one last chance. Jesus intercedes for us and helps us to open our eyes to the opportunities to serve God and each other that surround us in our daily lives. Through the mercy of God, we will meet our judgment with Christ at our side, fertilizing us, nurturing us, watering us, and feeding us. And Jesus Christ, who is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, will be with us through it all.

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