

Looking for the Fig Tree

Part 1 of Sermon Series: *Living In Between*

a sermon based on

Luke 21:25-36
(with reference to Jeremiah 33:14-16)

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How many of you have your Christmas trees up? Any real trees? I guess it doesn't really matter. What sort of Christmas tree do you have (or intend if you haven't yet)? Probably some sort of evergreen like a pine or a fir or an artificial tree that looks like a fir, right? Something that looks like a Christmas tree, right?

And yet, in the Scripture passage that we hear from today, Jesus uses the example of a fig tree. Even more – as he encourages his disciples to look for signs of the coming kingdom – he points out an obvious clue to the impending arrival of summer – “as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves that summer is already near.” (Lk 21:30)

That's an exciting time of year. Isn't it? Spring? It's a time when signs of life and promise abound. But here we are in winter - meteorological winter, anyway – astronomical winter doesn't begin until the solstice on December 21. Whereas in the spring day has overcome night and each day gets brighter, daylight is fading and the nights are getting longer. Ironically, a condition that will get reversed when astronomical winter (the winter decided by the motion of the heavens) arrives. Until some adjustments to the calendar, Christmas fell on the winter solstice – a reminder on the darkest day of the year – that God came to dwell among us and that since that day each day has gotten brighter.

Personally, I struggle with seasonal affective disorder. By February, I'm worn out. I love winter weather and snow activities, but the darkness. I'm ready for the sun, sort of like George Harrison when he wrote “Here comes the sun... It's been a long cold lonely winter. Little darling, it feels like years since it's been here.”¹ The day he wrote that song he was playing hooky. He was skipping out on a meeting with Apple Record executives and the business of the music industry – that could sort of strip away the joy of music.

Jesus disciples had been waiting a long time for the arrival of the Messiah. Like the people in Jeremiah's day who experienced domination by the Assyrians, Egyptians, and finally the Babylonians, they wondered if maybe God had given up on them. Even after their return from Babylonian exile, Judea was subjugated the Greek Alexander, and now to Rome. It had been a long winter. They wanted a sign. They wanted signs that there was hope.

So Jesus uses the example of the fig tree – something they were all familiar with – something they'd witnessed year after year. He tells them that they know how to read the signs of impending summer. Moreover, they anticipate those signs each year and they do so expectantly because they know that it means life.

Likewise the coming Kingdom of God brings life. It's already doing so, even though it may seem like it's still too far away. In fact the leaves have just fallen from the trees. We look at the starkness of the trees and it's as if we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death. But are we?

One of my jobs (in college and then after college when I was trying to figure out what to do with my life) was as a landscaper. I remember the first time that I was asked to help prune trees after the leaves had fallen. I was instructed to cut off the dead branches. It's easier to get to them without all the leaves that are in the way. But... Without the leaves, they all look dead! Or do they? If you were to look closely at living branch of a tree, you'd see the nib of a leaf bud. It's actually what forms during a process called abscission, when the base of that leave forms a protective coating for the impending winter. When the leaves fall off the trees prior to winter, it's not a sign of death or dying, but a preparation for life! Life that can be noticed when we look closely for the signs.

¹ George Harrison, *Here Comes the Sun*, *Abby Road* (London: Apple Records, 1969)

Human sin disrupted God's purpose for the world. Since that moment when Adam and Eve betrayed God's trust, we've been suffering the natural consequences. But God keeps providing signs of his love.

Even when he sent them out of the Garden, God provided Adam and Eve with fur skins to keep them warm. Even after Cain killed his brother, God put a mark on his forehead to protect him, a sign that God loved him. When Sarah's jealousy drove Hagar into the wilderness, God sent her a sign. God sent a pillar of smoke and fire to guide his people to freedom out of Egypt. When Elijah fled to the wilderness to avoid Jezebel's wrath, God sent ravens to feed him. Or maybe on the less spectacular note, when David was fleeing Saul, Abigail brought him food.

Then Jesus came! That's the best sign of all! We can sing, "Here comes the Son! The Son of God." He did all these other signs – many of which we don't even know – as St. John said in chapter 20 verses 30 to 31 "(That) Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." (Jn 20:30-31) But there were also sign in the people around him. Zacchaeus' climbing that Sycamore Fig tree. The boy willing to offer up his two fish and five rolls. The woman who desperately reached out, just to touch Jesus' clothes so that she might be healed. Those signs of faith – allowed Jesus' glory to shine through. It was there all along but like the sprouting leaf on a fig tree, those acts of faith served as a means for Jesus to reveal just how close the kingdom of God is.

That same Jesus – that very same Son of the same God who has revealed his love in the most desperate times to Adam and Eve, Hagar, Elijah, and countless others – that same God revealed in Jesus is offering us signs of hope even today. He's offering us signs that the kingdom is alive and that we can claim that life. So, why don't we see it?

Where are the signs? Aren't there still wars? Isn't there still suffering? Isn't there still oppression? Yes. But... We now speak of "war crimes", because of the influence of Christendom, people realize that war needs to be limited and that non-combatants should be off limits. Because of the way Christians cared for one another we have hospitals to care for the suffering. I was born in Methodist Hospital in Peoria, right across the street from St. Francis Hospital. Even in this community, two of the three hospitals were founded by Christians – it's in their names. We can see the influence extending beyond the church by those motivated now to do good for others that didn't happen in the world when Jesus was walking around. Service clubs like Rotary or Lions working to eradicate disease and to build up communities around the world. Even those who would criticize the Church do so because they see so many Christians failing to aspire to the value that Jesus saw in others, which is now a secular value – not opposed to Jesus but an outgrowth of his testimony and life.

In these days when we are living in between – these days when we wait for Jesus to return – we're reminded that we've not been abandoned – and that by our acts of faith – signs of his growing kingdom become evident to the world.

Remember in *A Charlie Brown Christmas* when Charlie Brown brings in that pathetic looking Christmas tree? The one that can't even support one ornament? The one that looked all but dead? What happened because of that tree? When Linus wrapped its base with his blanket and shared the story of God's embrace of human dignity through the birth of Jesus – that sign of faith – that small recognition of life and hope changed the other children. They all started to see the potential that was only fully revealed when they took part.

So many things in our lives can get burdensome. The music industry can burden musicians. The day to day grind of family obligations can wear on us. Hearing or reading the news, can fill us with a sense of dread. But they can't strip away the life that Christ offers us. When we hold to the joy of music, when we intentionally look for hope and love in our relationships, when we look to the news that doesn't get as much attention, we discover that the kingdom of God really is growing in our midst. We discover that we can look at the fig tree even now in the midst of winter and discover the life that God is nurturing for that day of full revelation.

AMEN