

Sunday March 6, 2022
First Lesson: Psalm 91: 1-2, 9-16
Gospel Lesson: Luke 4: 1-13
Sermon Series: Pruning Effect
Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel

This past Ash Wednesday, we begun our Lenten Journey on the new sermon series called “Pruning Effect.”

- And let me first lift up that some of what I am going to say to you this first Sunday morning of our Lenten journey, may be repeating what I said in the Ash Wednesday sermon this past Wednesday, or for those who may already know all about the liturgical season of Lent; this may be somewhat of a refresher lesson;
- However, either way, I am asking for you all to bear with me, while I review some of the information again;
- And that is because this time of our Church year is just too important in my eyes, to make any

assumptions on what people might know or already have heard;

- For the season of Lent in my eyes, is one of the most important times for a person; who may be seeking to reflect God's love and light to the world;
- For the meaning of Lent in our church liturgical calendar, is the period preceding Easter, that in the Christian Church is devoted to fasting, abstinence, and penitence, in commemoration of Christ's fasting in the wilderness.
- In the Western Church it runs from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday and so includes forty weekdays.
- Some people will choose during this time to abstain from things such as meat, chocolate, social media and more; all with the idea that we would use that time to connect with God through prayer, study of God's Word and worship.
- But why this time of year is especially important in my mind, is because in laypersons terms; **the**

season of Lent invites us all into a journey of self-reflection, self-introspection and self-improvement; so that we might align ourselves to be that much closer to the Imago Dei; reflecting the image of God that resides in all of us.

- **The season of Lent** invites us into a time of spiritual pruning, where (as I repeat the metaphor that I used on Wednesday—that will be our main metaphor for this entire Lenten journey); **the act of physical pruning** means to trim; as in a tree, shrub, or bush, by cutting away dead or overgrown branches or stems, especially to increase fruitfulness and growth;
- There will be times in our own spiritual journey; where I am suggesting that the same spiritual pruning process will need to occur, if we wish to bear much fruit.
- For there are typically five reasons that an actual tree, bush, or plant would need to be pruned in the

first place and I will summarize it briefly, but I encourage you to check out the Ash Wednesday sermon for more detail—but the five reasons for pruning are;

- 1. Dead branches hinder the growth of healthy branches. ...
- 2. For the Prevention and treatment of disease. ...
- 3. Pruning Encourages fruit production. ...
- 4. Dead branches and overgrowth pose a huge risk. ...
- 5. Pruning Allows you and I to better see our surroundings.
- So when Jesus in John 15:5 for instance, is cited as saying, “Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing,”
- My friends, we are no different; for I’ll name it again as I did on Ash Wednesday; that you and I are the

tree, plant or bush in this metaphor that I am naming;

- So in order for you and I to bear the fruit that Jesus is inviting us to do; I will reiterate that we must also be spiritually pruned as well.
- For let's take the Ash tree as an example; (show pics on screen)
- **Ash trees are considered** vital to natural forest environments and shelter-belts, as they are fast growing species—often known to be the first hardwoods to colonize disturbed sites.
- **Ash trees are tolerant** of a wide variety of soil conditions, including wetlands and riparian (riparias) corridors, and provide habitat and food for wildlife.
- So what happens if the Ash tree for instance were to become diseased?
- Well let's take the the emerald ash borer which is an insect that has destroyed 40 million ash trees in

Michigan alone and tens of millions throughout other states and Canada.

- The sheer abundance of the tree means that loss of ash, **will have a major impact** on the environment as well as on the economy.
- **So these diseased trees** from the emerald ash borer posed a safety hazard in high risk areas such as along highways; not to mention road closures required for tree removal, could cause disruption that might affect people and businesses.
- Furthermore when those diseased spores of fungus are blowing all around, one sick tree **can cause an entire community of trees to also become diseased;**
- Making it clear that not only is trees, plants, and shrubs interconnected, for their health and vitality are in many ways dependent upon one another;
- We my friends and family are no different;
- **We are all interconnected!**

- And so this afternoon, when I get the privilege of sharing my thoughts regarding this Ukraine war crisis at the Rally for Peace at 1pm at the Capitol;
- **I plan to lift up this idea** that not only is war not the answer, simply because as a Church, **we are not supporters of war...we are advocates for peace and reconciliation period;**
- **I also plan to lift up** and name this awareness that these unprovoked attacks against Ukraine are not just a crisis that Ukraine has to worry about and be concerned with;
- No, no on the contrary, **this is a global crisis; that we all need to be concerned with... for we are all already feeling the effects of this war aren't we?**
- For what we are feeling I would suggest, **is not just** the gas prices that are already spiking up and will most likely be astronomical when it is all said and done; as a side note.. I need to say to my

children....that Disney World is most likely off the table; as we are driving to Orlando Florida in May for our family vacation!

- But on the contrary **what we are feeling**; might I suggest, is the reverberating impact, of what happens when one part of the Body is under attack;
- For just as a sprained ankle may also cause more strain on the knee; or an injury to the spine can cause immobility to the legs;
- It is in this same way that interconnectivity works amongst a globe of people;
- **If one of us suffers, we all suffer**;
- So once again; **this is not just a global crisis**, simply because we empathize and sympathize and pray for the families and the women and the children in particular; who are having to flee their homes with their pets and belongings strapped on their backs; as horrible and unfathomable that this is to even imagine;

- **This is a global crisis**, because (keeping with our pruning metaphor); there is a diseased component affecting this world, that is the antithesis of love; that is spreading like wildfire across the entire globe.....
- **It is a disease** that needs to be identified, addressed and spiritually pruned; for it is preventing the world in its totality from being fruitful in all of its potential;
- And so where our lessons of scripture from Psalm 91 and our Gospel of Luke 4 as it pertains to our sermon series comes into this conversation is this in my eyes;
- Looking at Psalm 91 first; it is naming a sense of vulnerability and trust that a person enduring such a spiritual pruning process must hold, in order to be fruitful; in order to be delivered from whatever spiritual disease is afflicting them.

- You see the psalmist is not just merely naming an awareness of God's reality;
- The psalmist is taking his faith a step further by making a personal investment in his spiritual growth, by declaring that his sole dependence relies upon God for his survival.
- You see the psalmist in my eyes, recognizes that his sustainability can only be fulfilled by God.
- **For the psalmist has come to this awareness** that his spiritual branches are not producing fruit;
- **The psalmist has come to this awareness**, that the disease of his spirit has begun to take its toll;
- And so to state it even plainer; **the psalmist has had enough** with his current spiritual situation;
- **The psalmist has had enough** of not producing any fruit; **has anyone ever come to the point where they have had enough?**
- **Has any one ever had enough** of making the same mistakes over and over again; only to find

yourself back in the same situation or predicament or circumstance as before;

- For there is no shame in your game, if you have ever been in this place before...I know I sure have been there before...**spiritually stuck in a rut**...for this is sometimes the path of what I'd like to call the **sanctification shuffle**;
- Where you and I may take two steps forward in our spiritual growth; only to be pushed three steps back....**sometimes by our** choices, **sometimes by our** circumstances, **sometimes in our** grief or disappointments, **sometimes because** of our physical, emotional and mental health....
- So again the psalmist is at the point **where he has had enough**, of not producing any fruit; for whatever the reason;
- And so it is in the 91st lesson of Psalm, that we see the psalmist does not hesitate; to claim that he has

fully committed himself to God's care....**for he has had enough....**

- The metaphors **refuge** and **fortress**, depict a spiritual truth of experience for the psalmist;
- **A truth that reflects** that in this personal vulnerability and trust that the psalmist has placed in God, **the psalmist knows that he** is safe to go through this spiritual pruning process;
- For I stopped by to declare that **we also serve a God**, who does not hold our trespasses against us;
- **We serve a God** that gives us unconditional grace and mercy in this spiritual pruning process...every day;
- **We serve a God**, that is just as eager for us to clear out whatever is blocking or preventing the Imago Dei; the God within us; from being fully revealed to the World and ourselves;

- **We serve a God**, that celebrates when you and I choose to take this first step, towards investing in our spiritual growth and fruitfulness;
- **Now how the gospel fits into this equation in my eyes is that God through the testing of Jesus, is also letting us know that this spiritual pruning process is not going to be easy;**
- For there will be temptations all around us, that will try and deter us **from being fully in this spiritual pruning process;** that will even try and deter us from even starting this spiritual pruning process;
- For we also have learned through this pandemic for instance, that actual diseases/viruses— **has its own mission as well;**
- For as a community, we have traveled together through sobering evidence and data; that informs us, just how ravaging the effects of a communicable virus can really be;

- For over two years later, since the virus has hit this globe, I am certain that most of us can say by now, that they personally know someone who has been sick with this virus, or has even died from this virus...
- Letting us all know, that this is what communicable diseases and viruses do....it finds hosts without concern for age, race, economic status and more—**and it doesn't stop until it completely infects them;**
- One commentator that I researched regarding our gospel named that, “the objective point at which the tempter aimed was—to shift Jesus from the Divine purpose, to detach His will from the Father’s will, and to induce Him to set up a sort of independence.”
- In other words, Jesus was under a spiritual attack by the tempter; with the main agenda of killing his ability to bear fruit.

- And see this agenda play out when Luke then concluded the story of the Temptation, by saying that **when the devil had completed every temptation**—which suggests that the three recorded were only the climactic ones of a long series of attacks—**the gospel of Luke then informs us** that he (the devil) left Jesus **for a season** (v. 13).
- Leaving the last words of our gospel intentionally ominous, suggesting that he (meaning the devil) would be back.
- Putting this interpretation into my own words to stay within our pruning metaphor; the way that our gospel is ending is suggesting that **the disease will be back;**
- **Leaving the tree at risk.**

- **But here is the good news that I would love to share with you this morning; because although our gospel ends on a rather ominous and somewhat frightening note;**
- I need us all to remember that this is just a section of scripture out of an entire works of stories within the Bible that continuously reveals God's redemptive love for all of humanity;
- So why I suspect that our lectionary ended on this grim note, is because once again, we are in the season of Lent;
- A time where we are all invited to draw closer to God and place all of our dependence on God;
- And this process in itself can be very grim and sobering for many of us; especially if we have a lot of spiritual stuff to work through;
- So because we are all in different stages of our faith journey, I wanted to tell you that this is not how the story ends....

- For there is another story from scripture, that might help us to continue to place our trust and dependence on the Gracious One of the most High in our own spiritual pruning process;
- Luke 13: 6-8; Then he (Jesus) told this parable: “A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. **7** So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’
- “‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. **9** If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”
- So once again, another tree metaphor where you and I are the tree in my understanding;
- The tree in this case is a fig tree and the Word tells us that it is not producing any fruit;

- So once again, like Jesus was left alone in the wilderness;
- This fig tree is not only being left alone;
- But the grounds person is threatening to cut it down altogether;
- In fact one could get the sense that if the grounds person had it her/his way, they would have already cut it down...because the logic was **if the tree didn't** produce fruit in the first year...**if the tree didn't** produce fruit in the second year..**if the tree didn't** produce fruit in the third year; then the grounds person was ready to throw in the towel **and get rid of the tree altogether;**
- And this is where I feel like having a little bit Church up in here and say to you this morning as the old Black Church mothers would say in my former context....But God!
- Because lo and behold the gardener arrives on the scene and as I put this text into my own words..the

gardener comes on the scene and said...***wait just a minute;***

- He says ***'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it.***
- The gardener says....***leave it alone and let me work with this tree just a little bit longer;***
- ***Leave it alone and let me care for this tree just a little bit longer;***
- ***Leave it alone and let me nourish this tree a little longer;***
- Similarly, and forgive me I don't mean to jump all over the Bible with you this morning....but I am getting excited at these new revelations that just keep jumping at me all at once;
- **But if you turn to Matthew 4**, you will see the same story told from Matthew as Luke tells us this morning **of Jesus being in the wilderness**; except in Matthew's account of the events; Matthew doesn't leave the story on such a grim note;

- But Matthew 4:11 ends with the gospel saying that ***Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.***
- Letting us all know that in our gospel today; just as the devil was there...**so were the angels there!**
- Letting us all know that just as the grounds person was there...ready to cut the tree down altogether...**so was the gardener there;**
- Which lets us know that just as our grief may be there... so is God....right there;
- Just as our fear is there....So is God...**right there....**
- What I am saying is regardless of what is there... regardless of what is here....war, pain, evil and more...so is God....God is right here..amongst us...in the midst of it all;
- For we serve a God that will never leave or forsake us;
- We serve a God that will never leave us alone;

- God is here....working with our metaphorical soil... tending to it every day...fertilizing it...enriching it and us everyday....
- God is right with us...God has never left the grounds; for this is Holy Ground...this has never changed.
- Let the Church Say Amen!