

Bruton Parish Church  
The Third Sunday of Lent (Year C) – March 7, 2010  
The Reverend Ronald P. Jaynes

One of my favorite story telling preachers is Presbyterian Tom Long. He talks about his childhood church in Georgia where the older folks have a story they love to tell over and over again.

The tale involved a certain Sunday night in October 1938. Evening prayer service was in full swing, when a man named Sam, a member of the congregation who lived down the road from the church, charged into the prayer meeting trembling with fear and excitement. Finally gaining the breath to speak, he shouted, "Martians are attacking the earth in spaceships. Some of 'em have already landed in New Jersey."

The preacher halted in midsentence, the congregation stared at Sam blankly. "I ssssswear he stammered," a little unsure of his footing .... "I hhheard it on the radio."

What Sam had heard, of course, was Orson Wells' now famous Mercury Theatre radio production "War of the Worlds, but no-one in the congregation was aware of that at the moment. For all they knew, the world outside was coming to a flaming end. The little flock looked apprehensively at the preacher, but he was mute and indecisive, never having a sermon disrupted by interplanetary invasion.

Finally, one of the oldest members of the congregation, a farmer stood up, gripped the pew in front of him with his large, callused hands and said "I 'speck what Sam says ain't completely true, bit it is true, we're in the right place here in church. Let's go on with the meetin'." And so they did.

The old farmer had sized it up, measured it against his rough hewn view of Providence, and decided it was better to be in church praising God than running around the cow pasture shooting buckshot into the night sky.

According to Jesus, most of us are not nearly as astute as that farmer at reading the signs of the times, or at distinguishing what matters and what doesn't, at discerning what is truly happening in God's world. Just a few weeks ago, we heard a famous TV evangelist tell the world that he knew that the reason the earthquake happened in Haiti was the result of God's anger for something the Haitian people did a few hundred years ago.

In the Gospel passage today, some people around Jesus thought that some of the terrible things that were making the news there, some innocent worshippers killed as they worshipped at the Temple, and some others killed by a falling tower, suffered their fate because of God's displeasure.

Not so, says Jesus. That is not the way God acts. Then to sharpen our vision he tells the parable of the landowner who was frustrated by a barren fig tree and ordered the gardener to cut the tree down. To which the gardener replied: Sir, let it be for one more year. Let me dig around it, put some manure on it. Let's see if it can't bear some fruit.

This little story of Jesus has three characters: the landowner (God), the Gardener (Jesus) and the Fig Tree (that could be Israel, or the church

today, or it could be us). In that parable Jesus gives us the real sign of the times.

Says Tom Long: "Not some comet, not some invaders from space, not wars and rumors of war, but instead the gracious and patient hand that reaches out to halt the ax, the merciful gesture woven into the fabric of life that stays all that would give up on the barren and the broken, the merciful voice that says: Let's give this hopeless case one more year."

Remember our Advent buddy John the Baptist crying out, "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees." But Jesus says: The Spirit of the Lord has sent me to bring good news to the poor and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Let's give this one more year.

The New Testament Greek word used in that phrase: let it be is *aphes*. It means in different contexts: to let, allow, permit, suffer, pardon, forgive.

Episcopal priest Robert Capon, who wrote three wonderful books on the Parables of Christ, says of the Gardener, the Christ figure in this parable: "It is precisely because he, underling that he is, invites the owner of the vineyard into forbearance and forgiveness, that the barren tree continues to live by grace.

The world lives, the church lives, we live, under the rubric of forgiveness.

The world thinks otherwise, of course. In its blind wisdom it thinks it lives by merit and reward. It likes to imagine that salvation is essentially a pat on the back from a God who either thinks we are good eggs, or if he knows how rotten we actually are, considers repentance sufficient to make up for our unsuitability. But by the foolishness of God, that is not the way it works."

Here is why we call Jesus the Savior: because we know that we human beings are very deserving of John the Baptist's ax ...

Instead: as Tom Long put it: 'the gracious and patient hand reaches out to halt the ax, the merciful gesture woven into the fabric of life that stays all that would give up on the barren and broken' ... would give up on us ... and says *aphes*: Let it be.

Jesus came to show us how to love; how to live a forgiving life; how to give dignity and respect to even the least dignified and respectable. That was more than some of those around him could bear, it undermined all their supposed power. And so they killed him.

If there was ever a time for the call of John the Baptist to cut the tree down it was Calvary. But you remember what Jesus says from the cross ... there is that word again *aphes*. Let it be. Father, forgive them.