

Sermon Text for April 6, 2025

By Jen Eisenberg Seminary Intern

Faith as a Marker of Lent Judges 14:5-9 and Matthew 21:18-22

Some of you know, I was a missionary to college and university campuses for 20 years.

My second assignment was at Elizabethtown College.

I took a group of them to live and work and worship in the Seventh ward of Lancaster City.

The year was 2000. The city was very different then.

Most evenings, the ice cream truck came around playing its song. In the beginning, one young woman in our group bought an ice cream cone most evenings.

Most others on our team had really struggled to raise the registration fee and deal with the loss of income for the summer. They did not have money to buy ice cream and a bit of envy, callousness and conflict emerged.

As we worked through the challenges, and made our way forward, ice cream became our object lesson. Someone only had to mention ice cream, and we knew exactly what we needed to do.

In our Scripture today, Jesus offers a fig tree to teach his disciples faith and his deepest desires.

Pray and read Matt 21:18-19.

It's early and Jesus, having spent the night in Bethany is walking back into Jerusalem, to the Temple.

He's hungry.

So often, we understand these little comments about his hunger and fatigue to simply confirm that Jesus' physical body needs calories and nutrition. And it did!

But, here, hunger also confirms that Jesus, like the first Adam, had desires.

The first people focused on the forbidden fruit.

Jesus focuses on figs.

He saw the tree and he knew figs are good to eat. He wants to eat figs.

His desire is to eat the thing God made to sustain all people.

A little bit about fig trees: they come alive again every spring, about the time of Passover, March or April. They put out leaves and just after that, the fruit comes in.

So, when Jesus sees the leafy fig tree, he rightly expects to find figs.

But, there are none!

Pull up the picture of the fig tree painting. James Tissot painting

This fig tree is not doing what God created to do. And so, Jesus causes it to wither. It will never again deceive someone who is hungry for figs, making them think God is not able to provide for his children.

The disciples are amazed and ask How?

It almost seems like comic relief... a supernatural miracle of Jesus happens and they want a how to video from YouTube.

As if they were asking... How do you repair a broken refrigerator?

Or, How do you make sourdough bread?

Or, How do you enroll a child for school?

Are they looking for instructions on Withering Fig Trees?? Do they think they will need to Wither Fig Trees many times as followers of Jesus??

Jesus takes their question and uses the opportunity to teach them to pray with faith and to help them understand the events he is about to undergo.

Jesus instructions the disciples in faith

v. 21 says, Have faith and do not *doubt*

Doubt is one of those things, that makes Christians nervous, like maybe we have too much or too many doubts.

We often think doubt means uncertainty:

Something like... "It could be that Jesus is Savior of the world, but I'm not convinced."

When I researched the word *doubt*, turns out, it means something slightly different. "to be at odds with oneself."

A person with doubt is having an internal battle: to do something or not?

In that way, faith without doubt has singular focus rather than complete certainty.

It is not divided.

It does not say one thing, and do another.

An example of someone at odds with himself is most certainly Samson.

Turn to judges 14 with me.

The book of Judges comes to us after the Hebrews wandered in the wilderness for 40 years and before God gave them David and others to be kings over them.

Samson is one of those given as a judge or a kind of governor or caretaker while they were finding a way to live as the people of God in the land of Canaan.

As a newborn, Samson was set apart, devoted to God, with a special commitment to doing God's will.

We might think of Cecile B. DeMille's Samson (and Delilah)

A muscled, strong, heroic man who wrestles lions and wins the leading lady!

But, in Judges 14, we get a glimpse of a less -than-righteous Samson who desires things other than God's will

More than that, he is ashamed of what he's doing.

He hides his failures and tries to project his triumphant strength.

He's a man at odds with himself: Is he devoted to doing the will of God or doing his own will?

One example of how he "doubts":

Hebrews were not to touch the carcass of dead animals.

But, Samson, after killing the lion with his bare hands, scoops up the honey from the bees nest that had settled in its dead body.

Not only does he touch it, but he eats it.

Not only does he eat it, he gives it to his parents without telling them.

Though called, Samson does not lead the Hebrews into righteous living.

Rather, he deceives his parents into unrighteous living by giving them the food growing on a dead carcass.

In contrast, the fig tree withered through the prayer of One who has faith and is not at odds with his commitment to enacting the will of God.

And so, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray with faith and without doubt.

Let's look at the last part of Verse 21 about the mountain. Faith, and not being at odds with doing the will of God, will lead Jesus' followers to not only withering fig trees, but moving mountains.

Jesus says, if you say to this mountain, As if he was pointing to a mountain.

We don't know with certainty which mountain Jesus is pointing to

But, we know Jesus and his followers had to walk past the Mount of Olives on their way to the Temple Mount.

Is Jesus suggesting the disciples will pray that God will throw the Temple into the sea?

Is Matthew suggesting the Temple has become like a leafy fig tree without fruit?

There are Old Testament passages which compare figs on a tree with faith in God's people. In Micah 7:1-6, God proclaims his desire for the fruit of faith to grow abundantly.

And, if we were reading straight through Matthew's Gospel, we would have just read that Jesus cleaned out the Temple.

And soon, in Matt 24, Jesus foretells it's collapse.

If Jesus suggests judgment on the Temple, we know it is the work of God who is "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love"

Turn with me to Ex 34: 6

Nu 14:18

Neh 9:17

Ps 103:8

God is patient, but determined, that faith and righteousness will grow with ease and joy, producing a huge crop!

(Pull up Tissot's painting again)

So, Jesus is standing there on the dusty road,
beside a fig tree, in the springtime, looking for fruit to eat.
teaching his disciples to pray with faith.

To his east is Mount Olives-
where he likely preached the sermon on the mount
and in a few short days, where he will be arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane
under the leadership of the chief priest and the elders.

To his west, the Temple Mount, where he hoped to find faithfulness, but has been
left hungry.

And so, the fig tree became an object lesson to the early church.

Jesus is hungry for a church that grows figs of faith action.

Jesus is still hungry for a people that grow like a tree.

Jesus is still hungry for a people that act according to the will of God, not from a
place of certainty, but most definitely with a singular focus.