

Father O'Connor's Homily on 20 March 2022
Third Sunday of Lent-C

Exodus 3: 1-8a, 13-15
1 Corinthians 10: 1-6, 10-12
Luke 3: 1-9

There are lots of people in our world who are very good at what they do. But sometimes they don't cultivate a lot of hope in people they serve.

A man was reflecting on his successful chemotherapy. While he was in the hospital his fever had spiked. A doctor he did not know looked at his report and said, very officially, "You are infected."

The man said that he had felt very bad when he arrived at the hospital. But now, after that remark, he felt even worse.

And then his own oncologist came by and looked at the same report, and said to him, "You are really an amazing person to be able to put up with these levels of toxicity!"

The man observed that his own doctor's attitude not only built up his hope but also spurred on his efforts to recovery.

A bishop had written this: "In Saint Paul's trio – faith, hope and love – love is certainly the greatest of the three. But hope is what is most needed today."

And I think that is true. As I reflect upon my priestly ministry over the last almost 47 years, I have found in people a lot of discouragement and despair, a lot of feeling hopeless and overwhelmed. As we look at today's Gospel, the fig tree without any fruit may be an image of our own lives.

But we need to hope. We need to trust that God is patiently watching over us. And we need reminders of that hope.

The ancient Diogenes said, "The last thing that dies in a person is their hope."

Thomas Fuller, the 17th century British churchman, wrote, "If it were not for hope, the heart would break."

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "We must accept disappointment, but we must never lose infinite hope."

And then there is this one that comes from a priest in Baltimore: "Hope is going to your mailbox on a Sunday morning and expecting to find a gift package in it just for you!"

We all need hope, and the parable that Jesus tells us in today's Gospel is all about that holy longing.

“There once was a person who had a fig tree planted in his orchard. And he came in search of fruit on it but found none. He said to the gardener, ‘For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none. So cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?’

“The gardener said to him in reply, ‘Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it. It may bear fruit in the future. If not, you can cut it down.’”

Gardeners are so often people of great hope. Even though spring begins today, Sunday, March 20th, the ground is still cold, but there are bulbs buried in it that are going to come to life in just a few weeks – and we will soon enjoy the blossoms.

We can feel sometimes that our possibilities are buried in the cold ground, and the early-spring sun is doing very little to warm the lingering-winter winds. But God, the Master Gardener, is always patiently watching over us. He will give us what we need – one day at a time – to bear the fruit that He intends for us: to become the best version of ourselves, the one He has in mind. So live in that hope as we spend the rest of this Lent with a bright Easter in view.

And there is one more hopeful detail in this parable. Right at the end, the gardener says, “Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it. It may bear fruit in the future. If not, you can cut it down.”

Notice that the gardener says to the owner, “YOU can cut it down” – not me! And that is how God treats us. God is the Master Gardener. God wants us to grow and bear fruit. And God enables us to do so.

Saint Francis de Sales, the seventeenth-century bishop of Geneva, Switzerland, used to say to people who were anxious and fearful, “God and I will help you. All I ask is that you don't despair.”

We are called and graced to be people of hope – and to cultivate the seeds of hope in those around us.

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This is great advice and great example – from a great saint – on this opening day of spring, on this Third Sunday of Lent.