

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.*

In case you hadn't noticed, today's readings are all about fruit production. Jeremiah, speaking God's truth as a prophet, says "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit. In the very first Psalm, we hear that "Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked." They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; everything they do shall prosper. Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians, that in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. In fact, reading the Bible is a little like walking through the produce aisle of Price Chopper. There are dozens of references to fruits, and the nourishment, the special nourishment they can provide. It's all about bearing good fruit, in our personal lives, in our relationships, and even in our church. In our reading from Luke this morning, Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." Fruit, as a Bible motif, has this benefit of providing joy and satisfaction.

Now, by virtue of modern transportation and global commerce, we find that fruit is available year-round. Walking down that produce aisle in Price Chopper isn't like it used to be in years past. There was a time when getting fresh fruit in due season meant waiting until the time was right. And that figures into the Biblical motif, too. Used to be that to have fruit out-of-season, you had to buy it frozen, or in a can, or can it yourself. I don't know...does that make fruit seem a little less special today than in the past? When I came home the other day there was a package on the doorstep which I recognized right away. Some years ago, knowing how much Gale and I loved fruit, our son, Jason, and his wife began giving us the Christmas gift of "Fruit of the Month". So, each month we get a box of fresh, organically grown fruit. This month it was pears. The delivery always comes as a surprise, and yet it never fails...it is the gift which keeps on giving!

As I opened the box, it was like opening a treasure chest; finding each of the fruits carefully wrapped and placed specially among the others. I thought, how like God's great gifts and blessings this was. And then to know that next month there would be another surprising gift, just as God's gifts are surprising and unexpected, maybe even taken for granted. In those days in ancient Palestine, fruits were anticipated, cherished, and welcomed as they came into season. In those semi-barren hillsides of Judea and Israel, fruit was an expression of God's grace, patiently waited for and received, when the time was right, as a promise from God's creative dream. Jesus seems to say: trust God, your refreshing fruit will come, give it time, and do your best to care for the trees and shrubs that they may by your work be healthy and precious. For by being compassionate and promoting justice, everything you do shall prosper. Tend the vines, tend the trees, for God has given them the authority to bear fruit, just as God has given us the ability to bear good fruit for our neighbors.

But, speaking of fruits, and the lack of them when we are impatient, many of you know that for a time after my divorce some 40 years ago, I was living in a barren and despondent place. It was on the SW side of Syracuse, where I had rented a house, and was myself despondent and often completely hopeless. Mind you, I was working, but was poor. I was loved by some, but felt unloved. I was healthy, but felt as if I were dying inside. I was productive, but felt as if it all counted for nothing. I won't bore you with the details. In the back of my little yard, there was a big, old tree. I never paid much attention to it. It was bordered by the parking lot of the bowling alley behind my property, and was a welcome barrier to the stuff which went on back there. But otherwise it was just a part of the bleak landscape of that part of town. Then, one day, as I was leaving for work, I looked up (as Christians sometimes do), and I saw an odd orange thing up there in the tree. Now, this tree was very old, malnourished I think, and on its last legs botanically. But there, in its upper branches was an unexpected fruit! What could it be, I thought?! I got out my field glasses and studied it as best I could. You

know, I think it's an apricot! And that's what it was! There, in the midst of that run-down and dangerous neighborhood, that tree had produced a beautiful, colorful treasure! Who would have thought?!

Who would have even expected to find an apricot tree in that environment? It was a mystery, but, for me, a holy one. Seeing that fruit, a gift from God, lifted my spirits and sustained me for days, until it was consumed by birds and insects. It was a blessing, a true gift from God. But enough about me. What do you suppose it meant to the tree itself? Here I am, a tree out of place, old and probably dying, half of my root system covered over by parking-lot blacktop, and by God's grace I produce a beautiful fruit! The creative, productive power of God, given to me in my DNA by sheer, undeserved gift, bears fruit. Maybe for the last time, maybe only once more, but a reminder that I am alive! And I can witness to the yard and people around me about the wonders of God's grace. I can give testimony, I can be an evangelist, I can demonstrate the power of the living God, even when all else is crumbling around me! I loved that tree after that, and I had a bit of an insight into how I might be loved as I, barren as I thought I was, could produce good fruit.

I am no great authority on Biblical Greek, the language in which the New Testament was written, but I am told that the word which is translated as "woe" is grammatically classified as an interjection. An interjection is a short word inserted into a sentence which reveals emotion, like excitement, or fear. For example, I might say: "Winter is 80% over, Yay!" Yay is the interjection. Or I might say: "Winter is almost over, and I haven't yet ridden my snowmobile, Darn! Darn being the interjection. Or (me on the phone) "Gale, I'll be home before you and I'll start supper. Yay!" Then (me still on the phone) "Gale, I just got home and there's a water main break in front of the house and the cellar is filling with water. Woe is us!" Well, in Luke's version of the Beatitudes, as Jesus is revealing the true nature of God's kingdom, there are the three "woes", and we can treat them as interjections. Like this: "You who are hungry now will be filled. Yay!" But you who are full now will go hungry. Woe!" or "You who are weeping now will laugh when the kingdom comes. Wow!" But you who are laughing now while your neighbors are miserable will weep when the kingdom comes. Woe!" The kingdom, God's realm, God's dream for creation, is about blessings for all, not just some. And remember our 'Anglican sensibility' that God's gifts are never really blessings until they are used for the advancement of God's holy dream. So, you're rich and happy for it, but neglect the needs of others? Woe! Woe to you!

And isn't our experience of the Epiphany season and how it slides naturally into Lent something like that? "I've seen the light. Wow!" "But the light has revealed the truth. Oh, oh!" or "God's presence has opened my heart for me. Great!" "But it seems, as Jeremiah prophesied, that my heart is a little perverse. Woe is me!" The light of Christ will expose the truth, and that means the good and the bad. Oh, Darn! Our Epiphany will reveal the changes we will need to make during Lent. Yay! For if we are to be agents of God in the building of the proper kingdom, we will need to know. If we are to participate in the resurrection, as Christ has planned, our mistakes will need to be redeemed. If we intend to help Jesus heal our world, we will need to see clearly the way, the truth, and the life. If we hope to bear good fruit, we will need to nurture the healthy seeds and discard the foul. There are some "Yays" and some "Woes" to be reckoned with.

I think that's what Jesus is trying to tell us this morning; that our relationships, our personal lives, and our ability to show love to God and neighbor depend upon permitting God's fruits to grow in our lives, that they may be universally nourishing. And, one more thing: You know why fruit is so important botanically, right? It feeds the seeds! Yeah, well some of our hybrid plants have had the seeds genetically bred out of them, but the true and original reason that God created fruit was to give the seeds something to grow on. When we bear good fruit, we are investing in the future, we are encouraging the seed God plants to thrive and grow, that they may in their own generation give witness, like that old apricot tree, and may celebrate the power of God's dream of renewal and growth. The fruit nourishes the seeds; the seeds produce more fruit, over and over again into eternity. Yay! May your own "due season", the times when you produce the fruits of God, come often and dependably. And the interjection is "Amen!"