***“It’s Growing Season”***

 *Rev. Doug Dean, Easter, April 4, 2021*

*Gracious God, you have given me a moment to spend time with these saints You love so very much. I ask you to to guide my words and my thoughts so that I might say exactly what you have designed for me to say, and that the message you have crafted in my heart might reach those who are ready to receive it, might challenge those who have come with resistant hearts, and might bless those who need your loving touch this very moment. So, let’s get at it, Lord. Let Your love flow like water and let every one of us be awash in the flood. I pray it in the name of Jesus. Amen.*

Happy Easter, well, that’s it.

Lent has seemed long this year. It always feels like a time of restraint, of silence, of meditation, of sacrifice. This final week of Lent, Holy Week, seemed even longer to me. I read through the Scriptures. I read what Jesus did and said after he entered Jerusalem for the last time. I was struck by all the things Jesus did and taught during these last days of his life. I began to wonder why he said and did those things. As I thought about it, it seemed to me that, if I was him, I’d need to tell my followers the things that were to be especially important to me. The last thoughts, the last instructions, the last requests. This was like his dying wish. This is his last chance to tell you, so he’s going to tell the very most important things. He knew time was short. What would be his last acts, last bits of wisdom? So, a quick review…

What was Jesus trying to tell us before he endured his death and finally, resurrection?

 — Parable of the Two Sons… even if you say “no” to Jesus at the beginning, if you change your mind and choose to follow him you will be blessed

 — Question about Paying Taxes… give God everything that belongs to God and give Caesar what belongs to Caesar

 — Jesus Denounces Scribes and Pharisees… practice what you preach; don’t be a hypocrite

I just saw the numbers that show that for the first time in our history, fewer that half of US citizens identify as church-goers. The book “Unchristian” says that well over 90% of younger folks avoid church because they identify us as judgmental hypocrites.

 — Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids… act well today because you don’t know when the Son of Man is returning; be ready right now, today; start what you need to do right now

 — Jesus Cleanses the Temple… don’t swindle others, especially those who are trying to follow Jesus; don’t cheat the innocent

 — Parable of the Talents… Use your gifts for good, don’t hide them; you have been given great gifts in your life, invest them in the lives around you

 — Greatest Commandment… Love God, love your neighbor as yourself

 — Judgement… you will be a sheep or a goat

The sheep give cool drinks to the thirsty, food to the hungry, clothes for the naked, they visit the sick and imprisoned. The goats, not so much. But the sheep get to go with Jesus for eternal life. The goats get eternal punishment.

 — Jesus Curses the Fig Tree… (a metaphor for the church) because the tree is not producing fruit. Produce fruit.

 — Parable of the Wicked Tenants… the kingdom will be taken away from you and given to those who produce fruit

What does Jesus mean when he says, “fruit”?

How do we produce fruit?

Jesus lists some things for sheep, although they feel like more than specific things, more like “this is the kind of things I expect of sheep.”

 cool drinks for the thirsty, food for the hungry

 clothes for the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned

But notice that every single one of these things requires some action on our part. We have to actually DO something! And this is not the first time he has said this.

Back in Luke 9:23, well before Jesus’ triumphal entry, he said to his disciples: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”

So, in order to produce fruit, we need to do something, perform something, take some action that Jesus would recognize as being the behavior of a sheep, not a goat. That would demonstrate our love for God and for our neighbors. That would put to work the gifts we have been given, investing in our lives and in the lives of those around us. That would be honest and forthright and not hurt or swindle others, especially taking care not to take advantage of those who are naive or inexperienced. That we would act every day like it will be our last day before judgement. That we would do what we say and say what we do; no hypocrisy. That we would give to our society what we owe to our society and give to God all that belongs to God. And even if we have said “no” to Jesus in the past, turn fully to Jesus right now and vow to love and serve him in every way we can until we leave this earth.

 Take up your cross, your daily mission, and follow me

 Where is the Spirit calling you?

 How do you live more deeply into your faith?

 What will be your mission?

 How will you begin each day to keep that mission in focus?

Lent is over! You don’t have to think about what to give up. You can have chocolate again. You can have two or three cups of coffee in the morning, instead of just one. You don’t have to eat fish on Friday. You can have mac and cheese or a steak or fried chicken or cherry pie. Personally, I recommend the cherry pie. We have made Lent a time of restraint and sacrifice.

But Easter is a time of extravagance. At Easter, God gave us the greatest, most perfect, most wonderful gift ever created… the gift of perfect love and salvation. It’s a time of acting, of taking charge, of moving forward, of rejoicing, of singing and praising. It’s a time of choosing a behavior or a process or an attitude that produces fruit.

Paul helps us with this. Paul calls it “fruit of the Spirit.” When we spend our lives trying to follow Jesus, God sends the Holy Spirit to live within us. If you believe in Jesus Christ as God’s Son, then you have been given the Holy Spirit. It lives in you right now. And when you listen for it, you can feel the Spirit nudge you into actions that honor Jesus and God. Of course, we aren’t always good at listening and our own natural desires often conflict with the Spirit’s leading, but the Holy Spirit is there in us. The Spirit’s voice is there when we listen for it.

And Paul names nine qualities, nine fruits of the Spirit he can identify in the lives of those he sees who seem to live by the Holy Spirit’s guidance: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are the kind of character qualities that show up in our behavior when we listen to the Spirit. Notice that the list begins with LOVE! This is what producing fruit looks like! This is why Jesus died for you!

And at the risk of repeating myself, you will note that I referenced Matthew 22:37-40 a moment ago…

*“‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’* ***38****This is the greatest and first commandment.* ***39****And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’* ***40****On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”*

So, you’ve got a list of Jesus’ last thoughts about how we each should behave. You’ve got Paul’s list of what that behavior looks like. And you’ve got God’s commandments to love. This should get you started.

Today we begin the Easter Season, a time of blossoming and blooming, of newness, of exploring new ideas and new things, of growth and excitement. Easter Season is the time when we tell God “thank you” by deciding to live into our faith more deeply and more sincerely. We take up our mission, listen to the Holy Spirit, and seek a closer relationship with Jesus by doing what Jesus asks of us.

So, my challenge to you today…

You know what Jesus wants for you.

Choose your ministry, your mission, your field, your farm.

Go, do, and please God. Produce fruit.

*Precious Savior, you have said “Go, and produce fruit” to me, and I have heard your command in a hundred voices, in a thousand moments, in so many places and times that I know you have blessed me beyond my comprehension. So point me where you want me to go this week. Place in my consciousness those who need a loving word. Open my eyes so I might see where you want to put me to work. Give me the courage to give of what I have so that someone else may feel your Holy touch. Help me to say “Yes” to someone. Help me pass on the “Yes” that has been mine to enjoy. And thank you for saying “Yes” to me. I pray it in the name of Jesus. Amen.*