

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO WOMEN

**THIS YEAR'S PARTNERSHIP IS WITH
THE BLACK CAUCUS OF THE ACADEMY OF HOMILETICS.**

Our theme is "In the Moment" and encourages present awareness and honest reflection.

AN OPEN REBUKE TO CREATION

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Following his triumphant entry to Jerusalem, we encounter Jesus in the Mount of Olives, leaving the village of Bethany headed towards the temple. As Mark invites readers to the scene, we discover a hungry Jesus who locates a fig tree full of leaves. Upon further inspection, we learn that the fig tree has no fruit - only leaves. Disappointed by what he has witnessed and encountered, Jesus says, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." [1] Ironically, Mark notes, "it was not the season for figs,"- so what actually happened?[2] Was Jesus just hangry? Did he have unrealistic expectations for the fig tree? Perhaps, his arborist response was intended for more than the biblical audience. I believe that through the reflection of Jesus' encounter with the fig tree, we can discover pragmatic womanist responses to a creation that refuses to bear fruit.

Expected Fruit Among Leaves

Mentioned throughout the Scripture, the fig tree held nutritional and economic significance in biblical antiquity. Native to the middle east and parts of Africa, the *Ficus Sycomorus* bears fruit several times a year. The large tree, capable of growing up to twenty meters, initially flowers, produces a smaller fruit, then concludes the cycle with leaves where people can gather. In peak seasons, this cycle is repeated, and a second larger fruit rich in iron is produced. Providing year-round nutrients and shade to its communal context - it becomes reasonable as to why Jesus approaches the fig tree with the expectation of finding fruit. Simply put - where there are leaves, there should be fruit! The absence of fruit among a tree full of leaves indicates that the fig tree had lost its ability to produce. The tree no longer yielded according to and within its intended season. This contradicts the very desired essence of creation - life. The fig tree no longer generated life as anticipated by the embodied Creator - it had become unfruitful.

Beyond the Fig Tree

This behavior is a symbolic representation of the civil and religious state of Israel. The first mention of fig trees occurs in Genesis, when Adam and Eve become enlightened to their nakedness following eating from the truth of knowledge. To hide their humanity, they sewed fig leaves together and made loin cloth for themselves.[3] This act of covering identifies one of the

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many uses of the fig leaves - a means of creation to hide from the Creator. The Old Testament prophets also referred to fig trees when describing the welfare of Israel. [4] Considered the first fruit on the fig tree, in its first season, Israel's safety, prosperity, and promise are the fruit of obedience to God. In both instances, the fig tree offers a form of divine protection intended for creation. Failure of the fig tree to produce indicated a time of famine and God's judgment upon the nation. Hence, Mark's panoramic view of the fig tree full of leaves and no fruit indicates Israel's attempt to hide their humanity and lack of God's presence amidst their declining welfare. Ultimately, the fig tree's inability to produce fruit became an indication of Israel's inability to fulfill its creation role.

An Open Rebuke

In Alice Walker's definition of womanist, black feminists or feminists of color are depicted as exemplifying "outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior." [5] Jesus' prophetic indignation, found in Mark's Gospel, embodies this willful proclamation. Considering that Jesus could have told the tree to produce fruit, Jesus made a bold and risky pronouncement. He wills his enfleshed God-given authority not to alleviate his hunger but to establish order among a disorderly creation. Nestled within his own humanity, Jesus engages in a radical discourse that addresses the humanity of a nation. This direct protest to his own hunger is an actualized commitment to the wellness of humanity. I don't know of many who would do the same. To speak to and against the fig tree that has the capacity to feed him is a bold and dangerous undertaking. Growing up, I can recall hearing people say, "desperate times call for desperate measures." As an adult, I learned this phrase originated from Hippocrates, a Greek physician. Hippocrates wrote, "for extreme diseases, extreme methods of cure, as to restriction, are most suitable." [6] Jesus' holy vernacular and rebuke are not ignited by the time but rather a disease of unfruitfulness among creation.

Jesus' expectation for harvest on his way to the temple is a sacred social expectation that accompanies creation's commitment to righteousness. He curses the fig tree on the way to the temple because both creation and Israel have hidden behind the fig leaves of religiosity. Self-aggrandized and self-fulfilling, the fig tree became representative of Israel's religious and social welfare. Jesus condemns creation and Israel not for the season but for their deceptive appearances. Jesus sees the leaves only and rebukes the fig tree for its pretentious attempt to cover its bareness, similar to the Genesis narrative. This rebuke has nothing to do with the tree's capacity to produce as Mark notes Jesus cursing the future productivity by using one word ... "again." "Again" indicates that Jesus recognizes the capacity of the tree to produce and yet upholds his judgment for its unwillingness to produce. This is the outcome for those who hide behind leaves and are unwilling to be accompanied by fruit.

An Empowered Witness

As the disciples of Christ hear this courageous condemnation, I can only wonder how they processed this moment. Did they dismiss it as Jesus needing a Snickers Bar or as temporary

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frustration? Did they see themselves within the fig tree? Were they convicted by hearing the rebuke? Were they empowered by his ability to speak up? Or were they simply unmoved by the experience? During this Lenten season, I find myself deeply moved by the actions of Jesus. His words offer a resolve to the contemporary social condition of America and the religiosity of western Christianity.

Namely, Jesus' engagement of the fig tree first reminds us that hidden agendas will never bear real fruit. Jesus, an agent of God, calls out the fig tree for having leaves but no fruit. As I look around in my social context as a black woman in America, I readily see leaves but no fruit. Our society has attempted to cover up the humanity of the most vulnerable populations with fig leaves of political agendas. We have marketed particular bodies as the fruit of our labors without ever producing fruit. We have affirmed the degradation of our actions as just, while covering up injustices. We have chosen fake fruit over real truth. Like the plastic fruit that occupied my great-grandmother's living room growing up, this can never satisfy the hunger of those in need. These fruits offer no real substance; their leaves provide no assistance to the distressed and no nutrients to the hungry.

The rebuke of the fig tree is a condemnation of religious practices that prohibit the life of creation. As a millennial womanist preacher, the hunger of Jesus and lack of provision by the fig tree authenticates the lived experiences of black women. Long silenced and overlooked, the humanity of black women's experiences and the needs that emerge from their lived experiences have gone unmet. As Jesus speaks boldly by naming his needs, he establishes his authority and voice. This costly proclamation creates space for those at the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality to express to do the same. This model of prophetic discourse allows black women to reclaim their God enfleshed authority. Through Jesus' example, black women are normalized in their search for sacred nourishment, given autonomy to name their needs, and held religious systems accountable for the covert ways in which they starve sacred humanity.

This Holy Monday, may we all be reminded of the role and responsibility of creation to bear fruit. May we become a creation that forsakes our leaves for harvest. May we discern and respond to practices that inhibit life and forsake the needs of humanity. May we engage in righteous rebuke and holy discontent. May we find our voice and authority to openly rebuke unfruitfulness in every area of our life.

[1] Mark 11:14 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

[2] Mark 11:13 NRSV

[3] Genesis 3:7 NRSV

[4] Deuteronomy 8:8-10, 1 Kings 4:25, 2 Kings 18:31, Isaiah 34:4, Jeremiah 5:17,

[5] Walker, Alice. 1973. *In search of our mother's gardens: womanist prose*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

[6] Aphorisms by Hippocrates, 400 BCE, <http://classics.mit.edu/Hippocrates/aphorisms.1.i.html>

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A native of Kings Mountain, NC, Minister Angellica S. Sweat is committed to curating digital safe spaces for transformative ministry at the intersections of womanist theology, millennial ethics, and pastoral care.

Angellica holds an Associates of Arts in Business Administration from Gaston College, a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from Livingstone College, and a Master of Divinity with concentrations in Biblical Studies, Preaching & Worship from Hood Theological Seminary. She currently is completing a Master of Theology at Duke University Divinity School centered in womanist homiletics.

As a millennial womanist and licensed local preacher, Minister Angellica lives out her call through by supporting pastors and congregations as they develop relevant practices for redemptive loving ministry. She currently serves at the Greater Gethsemane African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Charlotte, NC. In addition, Minister Angellica is a proud member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated.

As a former corporate administrative consultant, Angellica founded Simply Angellica Consulting Group to support others in fulfilling their call. Through this endeavor, Minister Angellica has curated digital content for non-profits, launched virtual sacred spaces for ministries during the pandemic, and cultivated a digital community that is committed to critically engaging in #ThinkingThroughTheology.

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