Holy Ground

Jesus tells the parable of the unfruitful fig tree.

◆ In today’s gospel, Jesus tells the story of a barren fig tree tended by a persevering gardener.
◆ Young children need adults in their lives who model persevering, ever-forgiving love. We make the faith formation group a setting to experience such love when we emphasize communication and forgiveness over rigid rules.
◆ In today’s core session, we continue to explore the season of Lent and tell Jesus’ story of the fig tree.

Question of the Week
When were you given a second chance, like the fig tree?
✓ Getting Started (5-10 minutes)

Before the session print the Tree Figures, attached to this document.

In the session, explain:
◆ Today is the 3rd Sunday of Lent. Lent is a season of the Church year that helps us get ready for Easter.
◆ During Lent, we try to spend extra time praying, listening to God’s word and helping people as Jesus taught us.
◆ During Lent, we hear special stories, too.

In order to understand today’s Bible story, children need to know how trees grow and how a gardener tends them. Show children the four Tree Figures, explaining each:
◆ In winter, the tree has bare branches.
◆ In spring, the tree has budding leaves.
◆ In summer, the tree has full foliage and baby fruit.
◆ In autumn, the tree has fully grown fruit and leaves beginning to fall.

Ask:
◆ How do we take care of trees?
◆ That’s right, we might water a tree. We might feed a tree. We might need to cut some branches so the tree can grow strong and straight.

Mix up the four pictures. Have children close their eyes while you take away one picture. Then ask the children to open their eyes and guess which season’s tree is missing. Give each child a chance to take away a picture so that the others can guess. You might also ask kindergartners to put the pictures in the correct order.

✓ Gospel Story (5-10 minutes)

The Fig Tree’s Second Chance

Story Focus: You can use a houseplant and a large spoon as props in telling the story. Use the spoon as a miniature “spade” to dig around the plant.

Some trees grew in a garden. One tree was a fig tree.

A gardener took care of the trees. The man who owned the garden came every year to see if his fig tree had any figs. The first year the tree had no figs. The second year the tree had no figs. The third year the tree had no figs!

“This tree still has no figs,” said the owner. “We better cut it down. It’s taking up room and not giving us any fruit.”

“Please,” said the gardener, “Let’s give this tree another chance. I’ll water it. I’ll dig around it. I’ll give it tree food. I’ll cut away its dead limbs. I will take good care of this tree.

“If the figs still don’t grow, maybe we will chop this tree to the ground. But if the figs grow juicy and sweet, we’ll hug the tree and dance around!”

✓ Many Chances (5-15 minutes)

Use masking tape to mark a line on the floor. Set large containers (trash cans, dish pans, buckets, etc.) at different distances (1’-5’) away from the line.

Explain:
◆ In today’s story, the gardener wanted to give the tree another chance to grow figs.
◆ Let’s play a game with lots of chances to win.

Ask children to take turns standing behind the line and throwing Kooshes, bean bags or Hacky Sacks into the containers. Tell each child that he or she may have as many chances as are needed to get a toy into a container.

✓ Praying Together (5 minutes)

Gather in the prayer corner. Ask children what fruit they like to eat. Lead them in thanking God for each good fruit they like to eat:
◆ Thank you, God, for bananas!

Close by praying:
◆ Thank you, God, for giving us good trees, good fruit and good gardeners. Thank you for sending us Jesus to tell us stories about second chances. Amen.

Note: If you use At Home with the Good News, either distribute this week’s papers to the children before they leave or e-mail the papers to their families.
Discover the Good News (5-10 minutes)

On page 1 of today’s Discover the Good News you’ll find an illustrated version of today’s story.

On page 2, you’ll find directions for a simple planting activity children can use to review today’s story. As the children plant, you can talk to them about what plants need to grow. Tell children that God gives plants everything they need to grow. God gives people what they need to grow, too.

On page 2, you’ll also find a To Parents activity for families to use at home.

Singing Together (5-10 minutes)

From Singing the Good News, sing together:
◆ “I Promise” (p. 40 of the songbook, also available as an MP3)
◆ “God Is Before Me” (p. 44 of the songbook, also available as an MP3)

Note: To access both the songbook and its attached MP3 files, open your Spring-C Seasonal Resources folder, then click on Singing the Good News.

Today you can also teach children simple movements to go with the first verse of the song.

If anybody asks you...
(Put right hand on hip. Point your left index finger and move it back and forth in a “window-wiper” motion in time to the music.)

...who I am, who I am, who I am.
(Keep right hand on hip. Use pointed left index finger to point to yourself.)

If anybody asks you...
(Switch hands. Put left hand on hip. Point your right index finger and move it back and forth in time to the music.)

...who I am
(Keep left hand on hip. Use pointed right index finger to point to yourself.)

Tell them I’m a child of God.
(Cross arms over chest.)

“Child Of God” is an African-American spiritual.
Additional verse by DARIA (Daria Marmaluk-Hajioannou), Used by permission.

Art (10-20 minutes)

Polke’s Two Palm Trees

Place the poster Two Palm Trees by Sigmar Polke (attached to this document) where the children can see and touch it.

You’ll explore the poster more than once this season. We use the poster in this session as a way to help children talk about the tree of today’s story.

Invite children to talk about what they see on the poster.
◆ How do the trees on the poster stand?
◆ Can they stand like the trees?
◆ Can they curve their arms like the branches?
◆ What good fruit would they like to see on these trees?
◆ Can we use our arms to show what branches would look like loaded with fruit?
◆ Would we bend lower and lower with the good fruit we have?

Explain that in today’s story, there were all kinds of trees, but one tree did not have good fruit yet. The gardener wanted to help the tree have good fruit. Invite children to paint pictures of trees with good fruit.

Cover a work surface with newspapers. Set out pie pans with tempera paint and provide sponges instead of brushes for applying the paint. Show how to use sponges to apply the paint. Ask each child to paint a picture of a tree with good fruit. Explain that they can paint the fig tree in today’s story or any other tree they like. Older children may want to paint the owner and the gardener also.

Note: Learn more about Polke and see more artwork at http://www.arthive.com/artarchive/P/polke.html.

Painting with Young Children

When you invite young children to paint, you’ll make children and parents both happier if you take Sunday clothes and easy cleanup into account. Young children actually find it easier to paint on work surfaces covered with paper rather than on formal easels. You can string a simple clothesline in a corner to dry the paintings.

Newspaper is the least expensive paper for painting, although it is thin. Children can use it with tempera paints, but not with wetter watercolors. If you decide to use it, call your local newspaper office and ask for
remnants of newsprint. Usually there are rolls available. You can cut the paper in any size you need.

You can use pie pans to hold the paint. Foam brushes, sponges and even wadded up paper all make intriguing alternatives to traditional brushes. To protect the children’s clothing, use smocks. One simple way to make smocks is to use large plastic trash bags. Cut a slit across the bottom of the bag to make a hole for the neck. Cut slits along the sides for arm holes.

If working room and helpers are limited, let two or three children at a time paint while others are playing. Keep a plastic cleanup pail or caddy on hand with paper towels, sponges and a spray bottle of water. Either you or the children can use these supplies to quickly clean up fresh messes. The moistened paper towels used for changing babies are also handy for clean-up, but limit these to adult use.

**Fig Taste** (5-10 minutes)

Some young children may never have seen or tasted a fig. You can invite children to look at, handle and taste figs today. Bring in a few fresh figs or a bag of dried whole figs, such as mission figs. You can also bring in fig cookies, such as Fig Newtons.

Invite children to gently handle the fresh or dried fruit. If you only have dried fruit, explain that fresh fruits are shaped like a small pear, with soft pulp and thin skin. The many varieties vary in color from almost white to purple-black. Some are light green. Invite children to taste the fresh or dried figs or fig cookies.

**Young Children and the Gospel**

Today’s scripture tells us the parable of the fig tree that will not produce any figs. The gardener pleads to give the tree one more chance, just as our generous God gives us many chances to repent and become fruitful.

How can we encourage young children to be generous and giving? First, we can accept the fact that they are egocentric, having just grown beyond a stage when every need was met by someone else. Consequently they still imagine that the world was made for them! For the young child, this view is not selfish or sinful, but a necessary stage of cognitive development. As a catechist, you can model generosity yourself, and reinforce instances of generosity in the children with praise, such as “Kendra, I like the way you made sure everyone got a fair turn at the game this morning.”

**Where You’ll Find Everything Else**

- Attached to this Session Plan you will find:
  - Backgrounds and reflections for today’s readings, titled *More about Today’s Scriptures*.
  - Four printable *Tree Figures*, to be used in today’s Getting Started.
  - An optional game titled *Who’s Got the Fig?*
  - A handout of today’s *Gospel Story*, to distribute or e-mail to children and families.
  - This week’s *At Home with the Good News* to distribute to children or e-mail to their families.
  - Sigmar Polke’s *Two Palm Trees*, to be used in today’s Art activity.

- Open your Spring-C Seasonal Resources folder, then click on *Seasonal Articles* to find:
  - Information on Spring-C’s *Models of the Faith*.
  - An article for catechists titled *Keeping Lent*.
  - An article for catechists titled *Lenten Disciplines*.
  - An article for catechists titled *Why Use Art in the Curriculum*.
  - A helpful guide to viewing and responding to art titled *First Impressions*.
  - The Introduction for Preschool/Kindergarten for *Living the Good News*.
More about Today’s Scriptures

Today’s readings call us to faithful obedience. In Exodus, God speaks to Moses from a fiery bush, telling him that he will lead God’s people out of slavery. Paul looks at the experiences of God’s people in the past to show the Corinthians how to live in obedience now. In the gospel, Jesus advises us to respond to calamities with a spirit of personal repentance.

Exodus 3:1-8a, 13-15
This passage records Moses’ life-changing encounter with God. God sums up the mysterious, divine character in a personal name, YHWH. As a form of the verb “to be,” it can be understood as present tense (“I AM”), future tense (“I WILL BE [with you]”) or the causative (“I CAUSE [things] TO BE”). When speaking, God says simply “I AM.”

When speaking of God, we use this verb form as God’s proper name. This suggests a dynamic and outgoing concept of God, reflecting God’s activity in history rather than simply describing God’s eternal being as self-contained and changeless.

1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12
By reviewing the exodus and interpreting it as an example of God’s ways, Paul warns the Corinthians against idolatry and overconfidence in their own strength. The exodus is a foretaste of the salvation completed in Christ—baptism in the sea and eucharist in the manna and water.

The story of water from the rock gave rise to the rabbinic legend of a Rock that traveled with the Israelites. That Rock was identified with God’s Wisdom and also a description for Yahweh. Paul identifies the Rock as the preexistent Christ.

This passage addresses inclusion in or exclusion from the kingdom. Jesus rejects the then common idea that accidental death indicates the sinfulness of the victim. He turns the attention of his hearers from the moral state of others to their own.

Both the vineyard and the fig tree are probably figures for Israel, and the cutting down of a tree with bad or no fruit suggests judgment. Through the figure of the gardener, Jesus’ ministry is presented as a time that postpones judgment to allow for repentance.
Reflection
The conversation which opens today’s gospel sounds contemporary. Some people today think that those who suffer from war, disease or accidents are somehow at fault. “Well, they brought it on themselves!” cluck the smug and self-righteous.

Jesus sets them straight. Were those killed by a falling tower more guilty than those who escaped that fate? “Certainly not!” Jesus’ certitude echoes down the centuries.

He expands his idea in the parable. At times we ourselves sound suspiciously like the owner of the fig tree, who is distressed that for three years the tree has wasted space and produced nothing. We North Americans are quite conscious of productivity and quite suspicious of anyone who appears lazy. In fact, we take less vacation hours than any other civilized country. We’re amazed at how the French waste an evening at a café, or the English carve out time for tea.

But sometimes we’re the slackers, and then we appreciate the compassion of the vinedresser. Does his offer to hoe, manure and buy time for the tree spring from experiences of being treated compassionately? We’ll never know. But if we have been grateful for getting a second chance, then we can in turn generously give a second chance.

The Scriptures and the Catechism
Today we remember the revelation of God’s personal name to Moses. This name summarizes God’s very existence as an affirmation of life (CCC, #203–13). But as Moses finds out, learning God’s name initiates a relationship that demands the task of giving life to others. Despite evil in the world that propels us toward violence, suffering and death, our God steadfastly gives new life through Jesus and now wishes to spread that life through us (CCC, #309–14).

The World of the Bible
The Name of God
God is called by several different names in the Old Testament. The most important are El, simply meaning “God”; Adonai, or “Lord”; and the Tetragrammaton (the sacred four letters—ancient Hebrew did not write the vowels), YHWH (the best guess is that it is pronounced “Yahweh”). The first two are more commonly recognized as titles of divinity rather than personal names.

Yahweh is the personal name that God revealed at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). As God’s self-given name, it is considered especially holy. The name is some form of the verb “to be,” and, while the exact meaning is not clear, the name declares God to be the source of all that exists and the eternal, unchanging Person who always was and always will be. It is significant that God’s name represents being rather than mere external characteristics.

After the exile, the Jewish people became more reluctant to pronounce this name for fear of profaning it. By the time of Christ, it was considered a word that should only be pronounced in the temple on certain occasions. During synagogue meetings, the word Adonai (Lord) was substituted in readings. After the destruction of the temple, the official occasions for pronouncing God’s name ended.

In many modern translations YHWH is represented by the word Lord in small capital letters, which may cause some to forget that God’s personal name has been entrusted to us. God’s revelation of a personal name is an invitation to intimacy.

When we read scripture and come across the word Lord, we, too, should know that we are being invited into a close relationship. For example, King David’s song of confidence and joy in God’s shepherding (Psalm 23) bespeaks a relationship of trust, dependence and holy friendship with a personal God. “Yahweh is my shepherd...”