In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

This is the time of year when the trees and shrubs, which have been quietly waiting all winter, begin to sense longer days and the growing warmth of the sun. Have you noticed the swelling red buds on the maples? The tulip magnolias – which always try to beat spring around Philadelphia – are ready to pop into bloom at the first hint of 70 degrees. Yesterday I saw a weeping willow tree with yellow branches and baby leaves!

But these plant friends of ours are patient. They have been on earth for millions of years more than we humans have, and they know things we may never learn. The oaks may live for 300 years. Copper beeches regularly live to be a hundred. They wait, patiently, accepting the frosts of winter, the too little or too much water of spring, the heat and insect attacks of summer, and the destruction of their leaves every fall by cold and failing sunshine.

So it is not surprising that it was a burning bush that finally got Moses’ attention. Even though it was not turned into ashes, that shrub withstood some withering moments in God’s service until it was noticed. In Jesus’ parable today, the struggling little fig tree, which had sat in poor soil all its life, is finally given a promise of some fertilizer when a miserly landowner at last notices it and begrudges it life. How often does God have to get us to see the world around us by taking extreme measures? We humans are so bad at doing the will of God while we wait for the will of God!

It’s the job of a tree to grow, make leaves, absorb carbon, produce oxygen, and bear fruit. A tree does this year after year, patiently and as well as its circumstances allow. It is our job to love God with all our hearts,
minds and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves, faithfully and as well as our circumstances allow – year in and year out.

That’s the point of Paul’s Epistle to the Corinthians. He reminds them of all the difficulties the Israelites had in the desert as they followed Moses and became a strong people who accepted and worshipped the one God. They suffered and became faithful, for they learned from their mistakes.

That’s also the point of Jesus’ comments in Luke’s gospel on events that made top headlines then – but our history has not preserved. We know nothing about the details of a massacre of Galileans while they were making sacrifices. We have no record of eighteen people being killed when the tower at Siloam fell on them. And so it will be with so many of 2019’s events that we will spend time, energy and even wealth on – and history may forget. Just in the last month, we have had a terrible shooting in New Zealand, a devastating cyclone in Mozambique, and inundating floods throughout the central states of our country.

On June 22, 1929, a brilliant astronomer named Andrew Ellicott Douglass who studied the heavens at the University of Arizona in Tucson made a scientific discovery that helped create climate studies. He had studied sun spots – those high energy storms on the sun that mark high levels of solar activity – and realized that trees make larger growth rings during periods of greater solar activity. He also knew that there is such a complicated rhythm to sun spot activity, that trees preserve distinctive patterns of growth rings. They are almost like fingerprints.

A *dendro* (tree) *chronologist* (time-studier) can recognize a distinctive pattern of tree rings in one location, and then match a similar pattern from another tree. When the lives of two trees overlap, and the logs are preserved, it is possible to work backward and see the pattern of tree ring growth – two good years and three tough years, ten good years and four tough years.

That June in 1929, A. E. Douglass examined a preserved tree in Flagstaff Arizona whose rings took archaeologists back to the year 1237.
The same afternoon, the tree’s chronology was matched to the outer and most recent rings of Douglass’ theoretical model. The match took the full record back to the year 700. The scientific community was thrilled – there was a way to measure and even “see” the patterns of ancient weather and long-term climate change. Today, climatologists use more than 8,000 years of tree-ring data to help them understand the deep patterns of our planet’s climate changes.

Our souls accumulate growth-rings, don’t they? Some lean and dry years, and others that are rich with food and sunshine. Our country has accumulated growth rings. St. Paul’s has too. It has stood in various shapes and strengths here, on the top of the Hill, since 1856. Generations have come and gone, each contributing their gifts. Rectors and clergy, organists and choirs, Vestries and Wardens have all left growth-rings on the historical record of this church. And over it all, the tree of the Cross has been raised – to remind us that the Resurrection is coming, and coming again.

There is no doubt that bad things happen – as there is also no doubt that good events occur. We humans tend to look for scapegoats for our pain during tough times, until we finally remember to turn to God. Then when things go well and to our liking, we are tempted to take credit for them and forget to thank God. The trees just continue to live – praising their Creator by their very existence.

Paul and Jesus both remind us that there will be good years and bad years. Change will happen. Our job is to be patient and faithful, as God works out God’s plan in God’s time. Our growth-rings will record the passage of years. Our souls will record our faith and evidence of our turning to God through thick and thin. Our church’s history will record that we tried to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves, no matter what disasters or blessings befell over the years.

What a good reminder that is, this Lenten season at St. Paul’s.

Amen.