

ISAIAH 55:1-9 (p. 602)

MARCH 24, 2019

LUKE 13: 1-9 (p. 847)

BLAINE, MI

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Guide our thoughts and meditations Lord. Steer us towards the truth. Maneuver us around “what we want to see”, or what is “easy to see”, and direct us to the things of “ultimate significance”! Cause us to do the tough work, Lord. And through it, to be transformed into who you have created us to be. We ask this in your Son’s Holy Name. Amen.

“GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS”

There is a *Dreamworks* movie called “*Antz*”! It’s about, well, ants! They say it’s a kid’s movie. But there are all kinds of adult lessons in it as well. For instance, the opening scene pans in from an overhead view of a big city—down to blades of grass—down below the grass—down into a subterranean room. There we find an ant named Z, the main character of the film, with the voice of Woody Allen, lying on a leaf couch, and talking to his therapist. “All my life”, he says “I’ve lived and worked in the big city. But I always tell myself there has got to be something better out there. Maybe I... maybe I think too much? I think it all goes back to the fact that I had a very anxious childhood. My mother never had time for me. When you’re the middle child in a family of five million, well, you just don’t get any attention! I mean, how is it even possible? So, I’ve always had these abandonment issues, which plagued me. My father was basically a drone. And the guy flew away when I was just a larva.”

“And my job, don’t even get me started! It really annoys me! I was simply not cut out to be a worker! I feel physically inadequate. My whole life I’ve never been able to lift more than ten-times my own body weight. And, when you get right down to it, handling dirt is not my idea of a rewarding career! I mean, what, I’m supposed to do everything for the colony? What about my needs? What about me? I mean, I’ve got to believe there’s some place out there that’s better than this. Otherwise I’ll just curl up into a larva position and weep! The whole system makes me feel...Insignificant!” “Excellent,” says the therapist, “you’ve made a real breakthrough!” “I have”, asks Z? “Yay Z. You are insignificant!”, replies the therapist!

The scene then shifts. Millions of worker ants are shown, all doing the same job. An elaborate network of tunnels is used by endless lines of ants, each carrying a piece of dirt. In one area, newborn ants are assigned their lot in life. In assembly-line style, one newborn ant is labeled “worker” and given a pickaxe. The next one is labeled “soldier” and given a military helmet. And as Z resolutely heads off to his workstation, he says to himself, “Okay, I’ve just got to keep a positive attitude. A good attitude, even though I am utterly insignificant! I am insignificant! But I am insignificant with attitude!”

Have you ever felt like that? I’ll bet it’s safe to say that we all have, at one time or another. As Christians, we know that we are made in the Image of God! That we are loved! We matter! But still, there are times when life feels like it’s just on “auto pilot”!

We don't necessarily feel insignificant, or unimportant, but as if we are just "going through the motions"! And not to mix up my movie metaphors, or anything, but it's like Bill Murray, in *Groundhogs Day*. Every morning feels exactly the same!

Years ago, I worked at Whirlpool, on an Assembly Line. I'd show up for work, every day, just like everyone else. We would all "punch-in" physically, and then, "punch-out" mentally! Hundreds of us, maybe thousands, would come to work and simply daydream from 6:00 AM to 3:00 PM each and every day! Except for lunch of course. Then we'd perk up. Those refrigerators would continuously come down that line. And we would dutifully insert the "widgets" and the "thing-a-ma-jigs"! Our bodies were there, taking up space, moving even! Only our minds were a million miles away! Have you ever been there? Think sitting through a boring sermon!

You've got to hand it to Z! At least he is trying to keep a good attitude! But that's not always easy when you just "going through the motions"! Picture driving a car down the road, then suddenly noticing that you are miles further than you thought. Or reading a sentence, or a paragraph, or an entire chapter even in a book, only to discover that you don't have a clue what it just said? Think of a conversation where you mentally left! Your teacher was sharing a lesson! Your boss was conducting a meeting! Your friends were talking about what they were doing! But you, for whatever reason, went chasing down a "rabbit trail"! Daydreaming! Thinking about what you'll have for lunch!

Z calls it being insignificant! Utterly insignificant! Or at least his therapist does! You are taking up space! Surviving! There! But not really there! It's not necessarily bad, for a moment or two, every now and then. It's normal really! But what happens when that's your life? When you choose insignificance! When you intentionally, just "going through the motions"! When even though you are, created in the Image of God—and you do, indeed, have a purpose—you are not producing any fruit!

The fig tree, in Jesus' parable, is not producing any fruit. It is taking up valuable space in the vineyard. It's using precious nutrients from the soil, and drinks its fill of water from the well. It survives in that dry, parched ground, gathers in sunlight and goes through the process of photosynthesis, even contributes a little oxygen to the air! But that's it! It just survives! Barely! Nothing else! Insignificant! Every year it produces only a shoot or two. Only none of these ever blossom into life! The limbs are simply barren! There isn't any fruit at all! The tree is virtually useless!

Oh, it looks fine from the outside. Otherwise it probably would have been cut down a long time ago. It may even give off a little shade. The local birds may use the crook of its branches as fine places to build their nests. It's okay. Not bad. But it is not doing what it was created to do! So, the owner of the vineyard, in frustration probably, comes along and says, "Cut it down!"

You can't really blame him, can you? Arable land is at a premium. If a grape vine isn't producing, or an olive tree, or a fig, something has to be done! You can't throw good money after bad, especially on fruitless trees, can you!

The Prophet Isaiah says, "Why spend your money on what is not bread? Or your labor on what does not satisfy?" In other words, devote your energy and resources to what produces! Invest your time in things that bear fruit! If there is a tree in the garden that is just, going through the motions, get rid of it!

That is what fruit farmers do today, right? Non-productive orchards are ripped right out, roots and all! Useless trees are then thrown into a pile to be burned, and other, new trees sown-in to take their place. Aren't even the branches of semi-productive trees pruned in order to facilitate new growth? It's not such a strange parable then, when you stop and think about it, at least not here in Benzie County!

But maybe, for some, it is! Maybe the whole idea of judgment seems kind of harsh? This tree is alive, right? So, there is still a chance, isn't there, that someday it might actually produce? Why not leave it be! Nurture it some! Love on it! Coddle the dang thing if you have to! Give it care and attention! Whatever! Just be nice! Don't rip it out and burn it up! That wouldn't be fair!

My guess is, we have folks on both sides of that equation. Grace versus Judgment! But I wonder if any of us are in the middle? You know, advocating “tough love”! What I mean is, how many of us would say, “Go out and distress that unproductive tree a bit! Cause it even more grief! Make it work even harder in order to survive!

Dig around its roots. Make it feel unstable, and about to tip over! Take away its feeling of security! And then, dump all kinds of “nasty stuff” all around it! Bury it in manure! Make the entire area look, and smell even worse! And then we’ll see! We’ll give it another chance! Not a fun chance, but a chance! But if it doesn’t produce fruit then, into the fire it goes!

I remember learning an old Landscaper’s trick years ago. They guy would pound nails into the trunk of a dying tree, peel back the bark in several places, just “stress it” into growing again. He said that the strain of repairing those wounds would actually help the tree reach its roots down deep into the soil, and fight even harder to survive, and then to grow and produce as it should! It sounded kind of harsh to me. Why should a plant that is already suffering, be crippled even more? But you know, the Lord did say, through Isaiah, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, and neither are your ways my ways”! ...By the way, it worked! The tree started to blossom!

As Jesus shares this parable, He is right smack in the middle of talking about the Time of Judgment. He has already said how important it is to be ready for that day! How critical! How irreversible! Then some people come and report a terrible tragedy. Pontius Pilate massacred a group of innocent people during worship at the Temple. The questioners are speculating on the “reason” for this tragedy. “Why did this bad thing happen to good people?” That’s often a big theological question for folks. Their premise is, these worshippers were somehow being punished by God! But Jesus says, “No! That’s not the case. But unless you repent, you too will all perish”!

He then goes on to talk about another tragedy. A natural disaster this time. An accident. One in which eighteen people were killed when a tower fell on them. And the Lord makes the same point. “They were not worse sinners than anyone else. But unless you repent, you too will perish!” Then, He shares the parable of the unproductive fig tree! ...So, what does it mean? What is Jesus saying?

His point, I think, is quite appropriate to Lent. From dust we have all been created, and to dust we will all one day return. And we are all sinners! We all fall short of the Glory of God! We all rebel, against God’s design, against God’s Laws! And unless we repent, we will certainly perish! We’re the barren fig tree! That’s us!

I remember in Mark's Gospel Jesus stumbling upon a barren fig tree. Maybe it's a different fig tree, or maybe not? But it's barren, just like the one here in Luke. That tree is immediately cursed! "May no one, ever, eat fruit from you again!" But here, in today's lesson, we see Mercy and Grace. Mercy is "not getting what you deserve", remember! Whereas Grace is "getting what you do not deserve"! We still have Judgment here! Only it's delayed for a time. The fig tree is given another chance to bear fruit. "But unless you do", warns Jesus, "unless you repent, you will surely perish!"

So, let me ask you; "How do you see this parable?" Is it one of "Judgement" or one of "Grace"? Is the glass half-full, or half-empty? You are the Unproductive Fig Tree. So, is all that manure around you, suffocating you, or helping you to grow? Is all that digging, the disturbing of soil, going on around your roots—as unsettling as it feels—actually a good thing? Is it advancing your overall health? Are you, even now, actually starting to produce fruit?

Growth means change, you know. In all of God's Creation, things are either growing, or dying! Nothing is in between, just on hold! That growth may look ragged for a time. Maybe even disgusting! And it may smell very, very bad! Your entire foundation, the base on which you stand, your "self-reliance", may be shaken, right down to the roots! All kinds of "distress" may come raining down upon you! But is it necessarily bad?

I have to presume that the Gardener has been taking pretty good care of this tree. I mean why wouldn't he? It may have even had a lot of special attention. All of the trees around it are producing, right? Fig trees produce twice a year, spring and fall. And yet for three years, six growing seasons, this tree hasn't done a thing! Now it's harvest time though, Judgment Day, the Day of Reckoning! And the Owner of the Vineyard says, "Cut it down! I am tired of looking at it! I don't want an unproductive tree taking up space in my vineyard"! Scary, huh, especially if you happen to be the tree! "Unless you repent", says Jesus, "you too shall perish"! Going through the motions just won't do! That's not enough!

A Pastor, from one of those "Mega Churches", in a magazine article, was being interviewed by a reporter. He was asked, to what he attributed the church's phenomenal growth, and the fact that the average parishioner had a median age of thirty-something. Was it the five services on Sunday, and the two on Saturday night? Was it the full Rock Band, with all the amplifiers and lights? Was it the Espresso Bar in the lobby, or the credit card machines on the offering trays?

Do you know what he said? He said, "I think we've got an entire generation, maybe more, who have never had anybody look them right in the eye, and say directly to them, in love, 'You suck! You really, really, suck!'"

“We keep telling people that they are basically good! We tell them that they are making progress, or that they are nice people at heart, who obviously mean well! We tell them that the conditions in which they were raised is the cause of bad behavior, or that their genes determine how they will act! We tell them anything, and everything, but the truth!”

“But deep down, they know better! So why would they want to come to church and hang out with a bunch of liars!”

Ouch! That sort of shakes you to the roots, doesn't it? That truth smells pretty bad! You are a sinner! You, fall short of who God wants you to be! So, if you are smart, says Isaiah, you will “seek the Lord while He may still be found”! Because, “unless you repent,” says Jesus, “and start bearing fruit, you too will perish”! And humbly, all of God's people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Search us Lord, now, during Lent, and all the days of our lives. Open up our hearts to you, and turn us from our twisted paths. Comfort us Lord, as we lay our burdens down at your feet. And fill those empty voids with your own Holy Spirit. Forgive us Lord, as we humbly stand before your Altar of Grace, for we are your people, and you, our God!

Lord, you have heard our prayers this week, and our silent longings just now. You know where pain and loneliness exist, and you know those who are paralyzed by fear. You know of the stress and the strain, the broken bodies and restless minds. You know the troubles in the Body of Christ, in our marriages, in our families, and in the world. And you are painfully aware of the troubles between each of us, and you. You see very clearly where we have missed the mark, where we have failed to produce good fruit! You know us Lord, even better than we do ourselves! And so, each of these, we lay down before you now.

Lord, you also know of the joys and celebrations that we have experienced this past week. And you have been there with us during each of these times. We thank you for these blessings, and ask for even more in the days ahead! But we especially appreciate you always being there, in the good times and the bad, and teaching us through both.

Lord, this morning we have some special requests that we would like to lift up to you. Please hear us as we do. And please be with..... These folks are precious to us Lord, and so we pray for them, along with the prayer that Jesus taught us saying, Our Father...