

ISAIAH 55:1-9 (p. 602)

MARCH 20, 2022

LUKE 13: 1-9 (p. 847)

BLAINE

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”

One definite “perk” of being a grandpa, is getting to cuddle up with your grandkids and watch kid movies, guilt free! I mean, they are kid movies, right? They have adult humor and themes. And more often than not, an adult lesson or two! But they’re for the kids! And one of my all-time favorites is the *Dreamworks* movie “*Antz*”. Have you seen it?

The animation is spot-on! The story line is simple. It’s about, well, ants! And in the opening scene, we meet Z, one of the main characters. He is laying on a leaf-couch, down in a subterranean room, talking to his therapist. And in the voice of Woody Allen, Z says, “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. My father was basically a drone. The guy flew away when I was just a larva!

And my job, don’t even get me started! It really annoys me! I am 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? The whole system makes me feel insignificant!" To which the therapist says, "Excellent Z, you've made a real breakthrough!" "I have", asks Z? "Yes," says the therapist. "You are insignificant!"

The scene shifts, and millions of worker ants are 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 is labeled "worker" and given a pickax. 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, even though I am utterly insignificant! I need to be insignificant, with attitude!"

Have you ever felt like that? I sure know I have! Not necessarily the "attitude" part, but the "insignificant" part! I've had jobs where daydreaming was the most exciting part of the work day! I remember working on an Assembly Line at Whirlpool. We'd all show up at 6:00 AM and "punch-in" physically, and then all "check-out" mentally! Hundreds of us would come in and just zone out! Those refrigerators would come down the line continuously. And we would dutifully insert the "widgets" and the "thing-a-ma-jigs"! Our bodies were there, taking up space, moving even! But our minds were a million miles away! Except for lunch of course. We always perked up at lunch!

Maybe you can relate? Maybe you've been there? Maybe you didn't necessarily feel insignificant, or unimportant? It was more like you were on "auto-pilot", simply "going through the motions"! And not to mix up my movie metaphors or anything, but it felt like you were Bill Murray in the movie *Groundhog's Day*! Every morning was exactly the same! Routine! Mundane! Repetitious! Like sitting through a boring sermon!

Picture driving down the road and suddenly realizing you are miles further than you thought you were. Or reading a sentence, or a paragraph, or an entire chapter 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, or your boss was conducting a meeting. Your friends were talking about what they were doing. But you, for whatever reason, went chasing down a mental "rabbit trail"!

Z calls it being "insignificant"! "Utterly insignificant"! Or at least his therapist does! You feel as if you're taking up space! Simply surviving! "There", but not really there! Don't get me wrong, it's probably normal, okay even, at least periodically, for a moment or two, every now and then! But what happens when that's your life? When you choose insignificance, or allow on-going 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—a God-given purpose—you are not producing any fruit!

The Fig Tree, in Jesus' parable, is not producing any Fruit. It is just 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! But none of these ever blossom into life! The limbs are simply barren! There isn't any fruit at all! The tree isn't doing what it was designed to do, is it? It's 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 probably use the crook of its branches as fine places to build their nests. It's okay. Not bad, really. But it is not doing what it was created to do. So, the owner of the Vineyard, probably in frustration, 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!

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's what Fruit Farmers do, right? Non-productive orchards are ripped right out, roots and all! Useless trees are then thrown into a pile and 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, is it? Not 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? You know, 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, or Mercy versus Judgment. Let it be, or rip it out! But I wonder if any of us are in the middle? What do you think? You know, advocate for "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 very unstable, 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 an old Landscaper teaching me a trick years ago. He would pound nails into the trunk of a dying tree, and peel back the bark in several places, just to “stress it” into growing again. He said 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 that “My thoughts are not your thoughts, and neither are your ways my ways”! By the way, it worked! The tree started to blossom. I’ve even done it a few times myself!

As Jesus shares this parable, He is right smack dab in the middle of talking about the “Time of Judgment”. Don’t miss the context. He has already said how important it is to be ready for that day! How critical! How irreversible! Then a few people come and reported a terrible tragedy. Pontius Pilate massacred a group of innocent folks 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 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? In that context? 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. We are all going to die! 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!

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus comes upon a barren Fig Tree as well. Maybe it's a different Fig Tree, or maybe not? That tree is immediately cursed! "May no one, ever, eat fruit from you again!" But here, in today's lesson from Luke, we find Mercy and Grace. Mercy, if you recall, is "not getting what you deserve"! Whereas Grace is "getting what you do not deserve"! We still have Judgment here! But it's delayed for a time. That's Mercy! The Fig Tree is given another chance to bear fruit. That's Grace! "But unless you do", warns Jesus, "unless you repent, you will surely perish!"

So, I'm curious, "how do you see this parable?" Is it one of "Judgement" for you? Or one of "Mercy and Grace"? Is the glass half-full, or half-empty? You're the Unproductive Fig Tree. So, is all that manure you complain about, suffocating you, or helping you to grow? Is all that digging, the disturbing of the soil in your life, down to your roots even, as unsettling as it feels, or actually a good thing? Is it advancing your overall health? Are you, even now, starting to bear some fruit?

Growth means change, you know. In all of God's Creation, things are either growing, or dying! There is nothing in between. Nothing just on hold! That growth may look ragged for a time. Maybe even disgusting! And it may smell very, very bad!

Your entire foundation, everything 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 won't do! “That's not enough,” says the Gardener who loves us more than we will ever know!

A Pastor from one of those “Mega Churches”, in a magazine article a while back, 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, “It is telling the Truth. We have 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?”

That sort of shakes you to the roots, doesn't it? That Truth can smell pretty bad! You are a sinner, just like me! You fall short of who God wants you to be, as do I! So, if we are smart, says Isaiah, we 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. Please be with..... These folks are precious to us Lord, and so we pray for them, and their situations, And we do this, along with the prayer that Jesus taught us saying, Our Father...