

ISAIAH 55:1-9
PSALM 63
I CORINTHIANS 10:1-13
LUKE 13:1-9

Third Sunday in Lent
March 20, 2022; Year C

Taking up Space!

Mythology can be a lot more fun, much more interesting and intriguing, much more engaging and entertaining, much more attention grabbing, than reality! The same could probably be said about fantasy! That is why novels are so compelling, including the cinema, movies and theatre, anything that allows us to escape and pretend that we are a part of whatever world is being portrayed. The same is certainly true about what we call “narrative history,” that is, the comingling, the crosspollination, of facts with fiction to create a template that seeks to straddle two worlds, the world of fact and the world of fiction, of imagination or make-believe. Let’s pretend! Readily coming to mind are novels like Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*, Dan Brown’s *DaVinci Code*, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, yes, and definitely, a little or a lot closer to home, including the Bible, recalling an epic tale, the adventurous legends of a proud people, detailing so many of their dilemmas, telling the old, old salvation story as recorded and revealed throughout the biblical narrative, Hebrew Bible and Christian scriptures alike. Yes, the Bible not only records the interpretive experiences of its characters in their real time, but also their conjectures about reality, their musings on the nature of the universe and this planet as they understood it as pre-scientific, mythically motivate, individuals and groups. The Bible is a complex mixture of fact and fiction, and to read it any other way is to dilute its message and meaning, cheapening its carefully crafted words. I continue to be amazed at those stubborn individuals who insist that not only is the Bible the inerrant and infallible “Word of God,” capital “W” necessarily intentional, but that they demand, remain naively committed to the narrow belief, that

every part of the biblical narrative is literal documentation, a transaction dictated from the very mouth of God. There is nowhere good to go when anyone attempts to use the Bible in such a frivolous and abusively destructive manner. There, I feel better now!

So, as a way of sermon introduction, I want to use Phil Collins' debut solo single, "The Air Tonight," as an entry point. It is a song that spawned its own urban legend, the most creative of mythological origins, a story that seamlessly helps me get us to where we are going on today's homiletical journey this morning. I am sure you have all heard the hit, "The Air Tonight," an early 80's pop song that not only busted the charts but continues to remain very popular. After the song was recorded rumors began to circulate as to what inspired the lyrics behind a rocking melody, including a fabulous drum solo, that is oh so very familiar to us rock music loving aficionados. The first urban legend was that the song was written as a reaction to Collins' witnessing a drowning, including words suggesting that very thing. Supposedly, there was an individual who was close enough to save the drowning man but instead chose to stand idly by and watch him drown. The man was subsequently brought to a Phil Collins concert and placed on the front row, whereupon Collins sang this song directly to him and then outed him to the audience. Didn't happen! A similar story mythically recalls that Collins was on a boat with a friend who fell overboard and Collins, who could not swim, shouted for someone on shore to come and help. Didn't happen! What did occur was that Collins went through a painful divorce and this song is a reflection of his miserable heartbreak associated with the breakup! Did happen! To this day, his ex-wife laments hearing the song, upset that he has made a ton of money off the hit while not considering her or their children's feelings regarding the matter of the hit's public transparency. Now you know! Yes, this kind of interpretive folly is what we tend to do with our mythologies, including the Bible! But believe it or not, our interpretive faux pas are not the issue of this

sermon, just an occasion for me to get this story into the mix as a way of introduction.

Pretend with me for just a moment that the urban legends still swirling around “The Air Tonight” were true. What we have here would be a classic case of folks who had the opportunity to help in a dire situation, who could render aid, but rather choose to stand on the sidelines and do nothing to help, spectators rather than much needed participants, yes, all of them simply taking up space! And therein is the method to the madness of my sermon this morning as I seek to call all of us who call ourselves Christians on the carpet for the times we fail to act, for the times we fail to do something when we are called to do something, and the call to us to embrace a better way of living as followers of Jesus. Christianity was never intended to be a spectator sport, cheering from the sidelines. We should never be reduced to the inactive role of a bench warmer! We are all expected to be starters, active players, involved participants, our participation in humanity and the world’s unlimited complex scenarios demanded of each and every one of us. The great theological debate, formed and framed by the writers of the Christian scriptures, specifically in Paul’s letters, is reminiscent of the old Lite Beer commercials arguing whether their brew tastes great or is less filling, trying to convince potential beer connoisseurs that their brand is both. Paper or plastic! And for you margarita enthusiasts, frozen or on the rocks, salt or no salt! Faith or works! So many decisions! So little time! The early debate centered around Paul’s assertion that the “just shall live by faith,” formulated in the apostle’s epistle to the Romans, juxtaposed against the Book of James, which advocates for works as righteousness. The debate raged, culminating in Martin Luther’s discovery and interpretive reading of Paul’s gracious prospects about justification by faith alone. Luther regarded his newly adopted views on Paul’s understanding of justification as a breakthrough revelation, a theology that he gladly embraced, while jettisoning his previous

guilt-ridden, works driven, drivel, claiming that the Book of James was a “right strawy epistle,” not very complimentary of a biblical book in the least. On the other hand, our direct reformed descendants created and nurtured the infamous “Protestant work ethic,” trading in that laborious transactional nonsense, a practical theology especially espoused by our Pilgrim and Puritan forebears, who took this idea to an insanely extreme idea, making life a laborious challenge, a drudgery, for those who in essence were made Christian by force, and forced to prove it by their hard work. It was all designed to counteract the threat of temporal and eternal punishment by giving these coerced Christians the carrot and the stick. The ultimate residual result was the burning of witches, another societal blight forever engrained in the history forming our national culture, though getting little airtime as an outlier in our founding retrospectives today. Tell that to one accused and so burned at the stake!

In today’s Witness from the Gospels, Jesus is reported to have told a parable about a man and his fig tree, a tree designed to bear fruit but came up sorely lacking in the productivity department. What to do? What to do? You see, the problem with this tree was that it was not producing fruit, bearing no work product whatsoever. Well, a fig tree is not big enough to offer shade, is not very pretty, and so if it is not performing one of its primary, basic tasks, its baseline functions, it really is serving no good purpose and is merely taking up space. Unless, of course, you use it as leaves for clothing, covering certain anatomical parts! Not! Yes, I am developing a theme here! For three years, the owner of this seemingly worthless plant, after having come to pick some ripe fruit, sadly discovering much to his dismay, extremely disappointed, that the coveted fruit, the desires of his heart, was unavailable, nonexistent, says in exasperation and frustration to the gardener in charge, let’s chop down this offending tree, cut it to the ground, perhaps replacing it with a more fulfilling option. The owner astutely asks, “Why should it be wasting soil?” Uh,

taking up space! What to do? What to do? Indeed, it was a most discouraging conundrum for someone longing to taste a tasty first century version of a Fig Newton. The gardener, evidently having a soft spot for this questionable but beloved tree in his care, takes pity on it, calling for patience. The gardener astutely responds to the request of the angry and frustrated owner of the vineyard, giving him the slightest heed, pacifying the annoyed man, humoring him to a degree, no, why don't I dig around it and put some manure on it and let's see if that does the trick, causing it to bear the fruit that bears its name. Manure is a wonderful thing except when it is not! Ah yes, as you have learned by now, I am full of it! Question, why had the gardener not already long ago done that very prudent thing? Three years and the gardener, a real bonified gardener of all people, is just now coming up with that grand idea? But I digress; I often do! After all, this is a parable and not a portrayal of a real-life scenario! Important to remember! Literalism kills! Every time, all the time! Biblical literacy, on the other hand, is always life-giving! The owner obviously ponders the proposal, acquiesces and agrees to the suggestion. We are never told the outcome of this possible solution to the problem. So, we never know if the ax is laid to the wood!

The point of this profound parable is that all of us are being compared to this stubbornly benign, worthless piece of plant life, this inferior fauna and flora. Woe be it to any of us who replicate this behavior, who choose a lazy, a laisiez faire, or passive route in our response to living this Christian life, to following the ways of Jesus. Paul, in his pointed letter to the church at Corinth warns this congregation that if they continue their current path, this lackluster, lackadaisical, behavior, taking a pass on a positive proactivity, that they risk the kind of retributive response or reaction, the kind of punishment that was once inflicted by God on those unsuspecting perpetrating Hebrews who were traversing their wilderness road back in the day, whining and complaining as they went. Perhaps they just might

happen to be as so misfortunate enough as to get axed like a certain sterile fig tree! Yes, how unfortunate for them! What a pity! Paul “rebukefully”, made up word, scoldingly tells them, “Do not become idolaters as some of” their physical and spiritual forebears did back in the day. Idolatry in my estimation, even if my interpretation of this text is a stretch, but it is my sermon to you, not only means creating the idols that temporarily satisfy our wants and needs, bright and shiny objects, pretties, as some call them, but also may indicate the danger of being idol, as in way under functioning, doing next to or absolutely nothing when something tangible, very real, is demanded, called forth in a given bellwether, crucible moment in time. Yes, it is the ever-present danger of taking up space. Paul says, “So, if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.” Perhaps the self-appointed apostle was being reminded of the great lesson that Jesus’ taught right before he told the assembly that whole problematic parable of the fig tree story. Jesus, responding to those who had made mention of the unfortunate Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their pagan sacrifices, the height of insult to those Jewish victims who were all about ritual purity, cleanliness against any form of communal pollution, the reminder that “Godliness is next to cleanliness,” as Michael McCloud, my favorite Key West crooner says, and vice versa.

Jesus responded to their inquiry by asking them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way—insert, this horrific way—they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” No, they simply were citizens of misfortune who found themselves at the wrong place at the wrong time, kind of the way it is right now when the Russian-fired, not-so-random missiles and bombs land in civilian territory in Ukraine, killing the innocents in what are obvious war crimes. And I swore to myself I was going to set a boundary and stay away from that subject today. I guess I could not help myself! Paul’s warning is the same warning we read in the Gospels at Advent,

reminding us to be awake, to watch, to be alert to our surroundings, to see, be sensitive to and interpret the signs, a very intentionally active, participatory engagement and interaction, not passive in the least. It is a warning to be busy, to be doing something, something productive, anything positive, life changing, game changing in some, in every respect. Pardon a politically incorrect phrase, but none of us are allowed to be the proverbial catatonic wooden Indians, standing guard at the local cigar emporium, the frozen chosen, using a self-deprecating joke some Presbyterians say about themselves, if we are to authentically, genuinely follow Jesus with even a modicum of integrity and spiritual sensitivity. We are called to be activist, motivated with a predisposition toward activism, and our activism must always be tied to the social justice initiatives that in every respect were a priority, part and parcel of Jesus' myopic focus, his teaching and preaching, his mission and ministry, every time, all the time, no exceptions, no qualifications, no ifs, ands, or buts. So, it was then during the time of his life and so it is with us now. In so many respects nothing, absolutely nothing, has changed, no difference whatsoever. Why is it that a message that is so crystal clear, or at least should be, conveyed to us in black and white, and for some even in red, transparent in every way, a clarity not lost in doublespeak, subtlety, or nuance, can somehow be confused or rationalized to the point that doing nothing or as little as possible, as little as we can get away with doing, becomes acceptable, the unofficial mantra by which we live and waste our lives. Taking up whatever constitutes our cross or crosses is never a passive, armchair, activity. Sitting on the sidelines of faith or life, i.e., faithful living, will never cause a stir, never ripple the waters, never make a ruckus, never initiate any change, never even remotely afflict the comfortable or comfort the afflicted. Cliché intended! Nowhere in the Gospels is taking a pass an allowable option, no future in it whatsoever. An object in motion stays in motion. An object otherwise does nothing! Right now, the United States and its NATO allies are facing a huge, ginormous, dilemma, and that is just how active

a participant we should be in the conflagration between Russia and Ukraine. It is a real, the ultimate conundrum! If we do not do a major intervention, will Russia take over Ukraine or parts thereof, Putin carving up the Ukrainian's sovereign nation like the Christmas turkey? If we do engage any further, will we start World War III? Once again, I swore to myself I would stay away from this crisis. But in the not-so-immortal words of Britney Spears, "Oops, I Did It Again!"

Part of our problem, the dilemma inherent in our history in Protestantism is not only based in focusing, but obsessing on getting saved, an emotionally intellectual decision, a verbal transaction called a public profession of faith, always devoid of any call to do something substantive, to make any required commitment other than our belief in Jesus, whatever that means, and our belief in a set of doctrinal and creedal dogmatic nonsensical fundamentals that are fundamental to absolutely nothing relevant for this postmodern, twenty-first century world in which we live. Who needs dogma? Reminds me of one of my favorite bumper stickers, "My dogma got ran over by my karma!" We Protestants have all to some degree all drank deeply from the well of nineteenth century, anti-intellectual, emotionally driven, drivel called revivalism, obsessing on evangelism, failing to mind our own business, respecting religion as a private affair, as we passionately sought to find the lost at all costs and get them saved while sparing them the fiery brimstone of hell. We became the equivalent of evangelistic warriors in our vain attempts to rescue the world! In the process, we abandoned the call of Jesus to be socially conscious, to practice social justice, to pay heed to the musings of Walter Rauschenbusch who advocated for a Christianity laden with social action. We focused on the oft confusing and condemning Christ of the early Church and almost dismissed, avoided, or ignored the Jesus of history, the man from Nazareth, a real live human being. Yes, Jesus was a prophetic progressive in his day—coin that term—long before progressivism became a suitable,

acceptable, and yes, I would argue, preferable, way of approaching all things ecclesial and theological from a Christian perspective.

Every time I preach a sermon even remotely like this one, invariably I recall the non-parable parable in Matthew twenty-five called The Great Judgment. In this visionary dream sequence, a mythic tale on steroids, Jesus purportedly tells the story of two domesticated farm animals, the sheep and the goats, the goats anything but the Greatest of All Time—sports fans will get that reference—the goats unfairly getting the shaft, treated most rudely in this narrative, bias more than implied. You remember the story, the goats are the ones who ignored the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the lonely, and the imprisoned and impoverished, while the sheep dutifully meet every need as any need arose, adversely affecting, negatively impacting, any down and out human being. Jesus declares simply, you did these good things unto me when you did unto the last and least of my brothers and sisters. The goats failed to get the memo! In this story there is nothing about belief or faith, buying the propaganda of any ecclesial theological party line, no need for dogmatic creedal or doctrinal concerns. The only concern was meeting the concerns of those who were in need in whatever way they had need. It is a call to action, a call to social justice, a major plank of our beloved United Church of Christ. It is a call to do something! There is no wriggle room, no qualifications, no exceptions, most importantly no confessions, no tests of faith, no ifs, ands, or buts. Jesus' call is a call to participation in all life's realities, good, bad, and ugly, a call to participate in the joyful dance of creation, but to never be the proverbial wallflower, an office plant, and God knows there are enough of them in the office suite. Have you seen our greenhouse masquerading as an office? No, we are not to be like a barren fig tree, standing on life's sidelines, refusing to get in the game, simply, merely, taking up space!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and does not want us standing around, taking up space! Amen and amen!