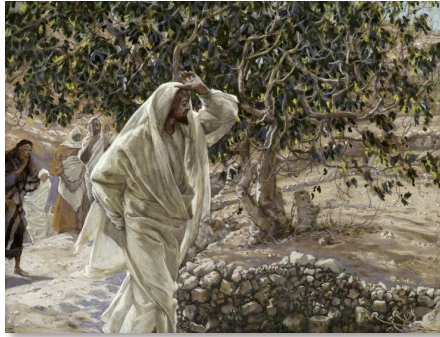


“What if...”

January 1, 2023

Rev. Bill Eichhorn



Jesus Curses the Fig Tree

James Tissot

Readings

Matthew 21:18-22

New Revised Standard Version

In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the wayside he went to it and found nothing on it but leaves only. And he said to it, “May no fruit ever come from you again!” And the fig tree withered at once.

When the disciples saw it they marveled, saying, “How did the fig tree wither at once?” And Jesus answered them, “Truly, I say to you if you have faith and never doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ it will be done. And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.”

Matthew 13:31-31

New Revised Standard Version

Another parable he put before them, saying, “The Kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

I don’t know how many of us made a resolution or two as we entered 2023, but here’s a thought to ponder from Kim Stafford:

*A resolution says, “I will...” A poem says, “What If...”
In time, a resolution is either fulfilled or broken, while
the poem keeps asking, asking.*

A poem asks, “What if...” and it keeps on asking, asking. Last October, I introduced you to a Norwegian poet, Olav Hauge, and his poem “It Is The Dream.” You may remember the opening lines:

*It's the dream we carry in secret
that something miraculous will happen,
that it must happen...*

Can you think of anything miraculous that has happened to CCC since last October? How about a generous bequest that wipes out a \$100,000 deficit for the foreseeable future? A bequest that buys us some time to call a new pastor who will have the gifts to help us see and embrace the new thing that God wants to do with us? The bequest is a miraculous gift inviting us to consider ways we could use some of it to make a difference in Marin County, in the world. Surely, it was not given to only perpetuate our congregation. We are a generous people here at CCC. In a time when many local UCC congregations have reduced their contributions to the Northern California Conference, CCC has continued to do its share of supporting the wider UCC ministries of peace and justice. Scott's suggestion to have the Christmas concert offering go to Mulberry International, an organization providing food and medicine to Ukraine, inspired us and others to donate over \$1,200.

Hauge closes his poem with these words: "...one morning we will glide into some little harbor we didn't know was there." For a time, my friends, we are extremely fortunate to be in a quiet harbor where we may begin to discern and prepare for the next leg of our journey. To prepare for the way forward, we need to exercise our faith, our faith in a God who makes promises and watches over them, who looks for people and communities to create the conditions where the promises of peace and justice may be fulfilled. In the first parable read this morning, Jesus tells the disciples that if they have faith, they will be able to do far more than wither a fig tree; they will be able to move a mountain into the sea. Even more amazing, whatever they ask in their prayers they will receive, if ...if they have faith.

I want to bring in another poet for our reflection this morning. Denise Levertov published a small book on religious themes entitled *The Stream and the Sapphire*. She called the book an enterprise in "do-it-yourself theology" in which she traces her "slow movement from agnosticism to Christian faith." Her two poems, "What the Fig Tree Said" and "On the Parable of the Mustard Seed" ask "What if..." Here is Levertov's poem "What the Fig Tree Said:"

Literal minds! Embarrassed humans! His friends
were blushing for Him
in secret; wouldn't admit they were shocked.
They thought Him
petulant to curse me! – yet how could the Lord
be unfair? – so they looked away,
then and now.
But I, I knew that
helplessly barren though I was,
my day had come. I served
Christ the poet,
who spoke in images: I was at hand,
a metaphor for their failure to bring forth
what is within them (as figs
were *not* within me). They who had walked

in His sunlight presence,
they could have ripened,
could have perceived His thirst and hunger,
His innocent appetite;
they could have offered
human fruits – compassion, comprehension –
without being asked,
without being told of need.
My absent fruit
stood for their barren hearts. He cursed
not me, not them, but
(ears that hear not, eyes that see not)
their dullness, that withholds
gifts *unimagined*.

There is a lot to take in here. But it is clear the fig tree wants us to see that Christ, the poet, spoke in images, in metaphors, in parables that were like riddles, in koans meant to provoke enlightenment. Jesus offered the metaphor of the barren fig tree to prod the disciples into seeing how they had failed to offer “the human fruits” of compassion and comprehension to him because of a lack of imagination. “He cursed not me, not them, but...their dullness, that withholds gifts *unimagined*.”

I believe Denis Levertov’s understanding of the parable of the fig tree asks us *What if....* What if we did bring forth what is within us? What if, without being asked, we gave our compassion and lived this comprehension of our faith every day? What if we all renewed our pledges, our commitment of time and our energy to CCC instead of waiting to see how the search pans out? Let us not fall into the trap of dullness because we stopped imagining that our compassion, that our gifts, that our faith don’t matter. My friends, faith does matter. The healing of the planet, the realization of a nation united by the dream of peace and justice for all depends, I believe, on people having faith. Levertov’s poem “On the Parable of the Mustard Seed” speaks of a kingdom of faith that is rare. In part, it reads:

Who ever saw the mustard-plant,
wayside weed or tended crop,
grow tall as a shrub, let alone a tree, a treeful
of shade and nest and songs?
Acres of yellow,
not a bird of the air in sight.

No, He who knew
the west wind brings
the rain, the south wind
thunder, who walked the field-paths
running His hand along wheatstems to glean
those intimate milky kernels, good
to break on the tongue,

was talking of miracle, the seed
within us, so small
we take it for worthless, a mustard-seed, dust,
nothing ...

Faith is rare, He must have been saying,
prodigious, unique –
one infinitesimal grain divided
like loaves and fishes,

as if from a mustard-seed
a great shade-tree grew. That rare,
that strange: the kingdom

a tree. The soul
a bird. A great concourse of birds
at home there, wings among yellow flowers.
The waiting
kingdom of faith, the seed
waiting to be sown.

The poet suggests that Jesus was talking about a miracle in the parable, the miracle being that seed of faith within us, “the seed waiting to be sown.” What if... what if together, we sow the small, rare seeds of faith waiting to be sown? What if those seeds can be divided like loaves and fishes? As a congregation we are aging, and we are declining in membership. Fewer people are able to do the tasks of governance and program. That’s all true. But what if... what if we saw ourselves not as a church in decline, but as a congregation ready to take on the challenge of Isaiah: “Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing. Do you not see it?”

“Faith is rare... *as if* from a mustard-seed a great shade-tree grew;” as if the small seeds of faith within us could grow into the dream God carries for us. What if, my friends... what if?

