

**Third Sunday of Lent – Cycle C**  
**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – March 24, 2019**  
**Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr., Pastor**

When Bishop Talley came to visit a couple of weeks ago, I warned him that in Memphis we closed everything at the first flake of snow – and sometimes at even the first prediction of a snowflake. “I’m from Georgia,” he replied, “we do the same thing.” I didn’t have the chance to tell him that the real danger in Memphis isn’t snow, but ice. Some of you may remember the devastating ice storms we’ve endured over the years. Twenty-five years ago now, the legendary ice storm of 1994 knocked out power for days – and in some cases, for weeks. It took the beautiful old trees years to recover some of their former beauty and many were so damaged that they just had to be taken down. On the street where I grew up, there was a large, majestic tree that anchored the corner. The ice storm didn’t bring the tree down, but so many branches were broken that the tree would have never recovered. Like so many of the trees that year, it had to be removed. To this day, I can’t look down the street and see that corner without remembering that great tree.

As today’s gospel reflects, the people of Jesus’ day also knew that a tree that was not producing, a tree that was badly damaged or infected needed to be tended to or to be removed. In the parable he told his disciples, Jesus gave essentially the same explanation that we Memphians hear so often after ice storms or straight-line winds – a damaged tree is taking up valuable space and could endanger the others if it is not trimmed or cut down. Of course, as you probably guessed, Jesus’ parable is not really about forestry. Yes, he spoke in terms of an orchard, but he was really speaking to us about the condition of our souls. Our relationship with God is much like an orchard – sometimes nourishing and healthy and bearing great fruit. Invariably, however, just as a tree dies, our loving relationship is interrupted by our sin. And the only way to make things right is to clear away the dead branches – to rid ourselves of the sin. We know that. We’ve heard it before this Lent. Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel. But today, we hear a bit more about the process – we learn from Jesus’ parable that removing sin from our lives is not always as simple as saying no. Sometimes our sin runs deep and removing it requires great effort. It can be as difficult and as painful as pruning an orchard or restoring a neighborhood after an ice storm. We must attend to the roots, tilling and fertilizing the soil until our orchard, our forest, our neighborhood, our soul is healthy again.

Indeed, attention to the ground of our soul is important. In the first reading, Moses is immediately attracted to the burning bush. Yet before he could approach

it, God instructs him to remove his sandals as he was standing on holy ground. It was, of course, the same pasture Moses had undoubtedly crossed hundreds of times while tending the flocks. But God's presence that day made it holy ground. Our challenge is to realize that God is ever-present and that every place where we encounter God – every place where our soul is touched by the divine hand – is holy ground. Yet holy ground is not untouchable. It must be revered, but it must also be tilled and worked, fertilized and fed. We must not be afraid – for just as the bush was not consumed by the fire – so we will not be destroyed in the difficult process of spiritual growth.

We work the holy ground of our souls when we examine our lives and uproot the weeds of self-righteousness, gossip, and hatred. We clear the orchard when we cut down the dead branches of habitual sin and society's misguided standards. We feed the soil by our prayer, by our reading of Scripture, and by our celebration of the sacraments. None of this is easy. Recognizing our habits of sin and uprooting and cutting them down can be especially painful. We often avoid a thorough examination of conscience much as we avoid looking at our neighborhoods after an ice storm. The damaged condition is just too much to take in. Yet that is our Lenten task – to stand on the holy ground of our souls – in the midst of the messes of our lives – and to recognize God's healing presence there.

The best way – the only way – to do this is to approach God in daily prayer. We are invited to pray for others – for the sick, for those in need and those who have died. We are invited to pray for our city and our world. In this time when we await the installation of our new bishop and when we are confronted with the scandals of the past and of the present, we pray especially for our Church. But more than anything else, our personal – daily – prayer invites God into the holy ground of our heart. God will not force open our hearts, our lives – he waits patiently for us to invite him in. We are invited this Lent to renew our commitment to prayer. Yes, we have a responsibility to give praise and thanks to God. Yes, we have a responsibility to pray for one another. But more than anything else, we have a responsibility to ourselves – to be the best disciple that we can be – and that is only possible when we let the healing light of Christ into the dark corners of our soul. Make a commitment to prayer – a commitment to God and to yourself. Till the soil of your heart's holy ground.