

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Proverbs 24:30-34

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA
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Sermon Title: "Weedwhacking and Field Tending" (Third Renewal Service – Listening to and Hearing the Call of God)

There is a children's book that my daughter still owns, which is called *Tops and Bottoms*.¹ It is about a very lazy bear who has lots of money and lots of land, but he does nothing with them. Instead, he sleeps all day, letting his house and land turn to ruin. Down the street lives Mr. Hare and his family. They used to own land but they had to sell it off, in order to pay a bet that Mr. Hare lost to a certain tortoise in a certain race. Now the Hare family is destitute and starving.

Mr. Hare comes up with a scheme: He goes to Mr. Bear about a business proposition. He will farm Bear's vast land, and whatever is produced half of it will go to Bear. All he has to do is sleep all day, every day, and wait for the harvest. Bear doesn't smell a scam, so he agrees to it. But here is the catch: Hare will get the bottom portion of whatever it harvested, and Bear will get the top portion.

So, Hare's family works the land, plants the seeds, and grows a wonderful harvest... of carrots and beets and rashes. Those plants grow in the ground, so Hare

¹ Adapted and illustrated by Janet Stevens.

gets the bottoms. Bear gets a pile of useless leaves.

Bear is unhappy, so he tells Hare that he will get the bottoms in the next harvest. Hare will get the tops. Bear sleeps during the growing season as before, while Hare and family plant lettuce, broccoli, and celery, food that grows above the ground. Again, Bear gets the scraps. During the next harvest Bear demands to receive both tops and bottoms, but the Hare family grows corn which grows in the middle of the plant. Bear finally gets it. He finally gets to work, and never sleeps through a planting or harvesting season again.

One of the lessons that comes out of this children's story is that one has to learn how to keep things together. A person cannot let things go, or else he or she will become poorer. Things will fall apart with too much laziness. Mr. Bear cannot sleep his days away, no matter how much money he has, because everything he owns will break down, waste away. Mr. Hare has nothing but chooses to do something to help the family, and now they have food on the table and money to purchase more land from the food they could sell.

Indirectly, this story may teach us a lesson about listening to and hearing the call of God. The call of

God is active. It never sleeps nor takes a vacation. God is always calling us to something: worship, ministry, fellowship, education, outreach. The mission field is wide and vast – it is immeasurable the things that God may call to, and God means for us to respond. God doesn't call us so we might just listen and think God's voice is so nice to hear. As God's call is active, God means for us to be active, on board with what God is doing. If we act like Mr. Bear, allowing laziness or indifference to dictate our respond, then we will get nowhere. No matter how much we already have, nothing will get done. Things will soon fall apart under our watch.

The parable in Proverbs 24 might be an obscure parable to us. I happened to come across it while reading my daily devotionals. It is an interesting story that this one man, this one traveler, tells us. He's taking a leisurely walk through the countryside, and he happens upon a field of a lazy man. Maybe that man's name was Bear. Our traveler doesn't describe the state of the field at first. He describes the state of the man: a sluggard, a loaf, a lazy individual, lazy in body and lazy in brains. The man simply doesn't get it. The field is overgrown with thorns, weeds cover what the thorns do not, and the stone wall serving as a

boundary around the field is not much of a boundary. The place is in shambles, and it is the owner's fault. Totally and completely. He definitely isn't in his field, tending to the soil and repairing the wall.

Our traveler stops on the road, and put his hand under his chin. "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hand to rest." Our traveler isn't being nice. We wouldn't want him saying this of us. Sometimes when people aren't feeling well, we tell them to lie down and take a nap. The rest will do them good. I took a nice little nap before coming here this evening – I like my Sunday naps after morning worship. But the nap comes after "tending to the field," so to speak. This morning, I was a part of some good fellowship and learning and worship with the fine folks of Morrow Presbyterian. We shared with each other the word of God, and we listening carefully to what that word is telling us to do, and then we examined and discerned and digested God's word together. We fulfilled some of God's call right in our church this morning. All of us probably did that this morning in this church and the Methodist church up the road. Once we carried out some of God's call – after we tended God's field a bit – I took a short nap, and now we gathered here for more listening and responding to the call of God.

The traveler in Proverbs 24 sees the field, and knows the owner has done nothing. There has been no listening, no examining, no digesting of what he needs to understand. Our traveler says “a little sleep and slumber,” knowing that a little turns to a lot. “A folding of the hands” doesn’t relate to prayer. It relates to folding your fingers together, and placing your hands between your belly and chest, leaning back, and thinking that nothing needs to be done. It is a posture of arrogance and clueless-ness, while the field grows thorns and weeds, and the wall comes crashing down.

What does God call us to, since God’s voice is so active? Worship is one. We are built for worship. We are programmed to honor and praise our God and Lord. There is no excuse for why we cannot worship, and get ourselves involved in the worship of our God. I have had people come to me in the past and complain about worship. They don’t like the sound of the organ or the way people drone out hymns. Others don’t like the loud band playing in front of them, and all those praise songs that repeat and repeat and repeat. The message is too long (nobody complains that the message is not long enough). The service is too long. I don’t feel the presence of God in worship, they have told me.

If you do not like worship, stop complaining and get on the Worship Team. Find out who the Chair is, and find out when the next meeting is. And then, don't come with guns blasts. Come with an open heart and mind, because the point of meeting is to discern together the call of God for worship. Together the Worship Team listens to God's call for more-enriched worship, and together they carry out the order and shape of worship that brings people closer to God.

And it doesn't matter what church you go to. It doesn't matter if you like the preacher or not, or hate the organ or drums or not. We are in worship. God is present. God is speaking. Worship is no time for sleeping or slumbering. Don't even think about folding your hands together. Come prepared, come ready, for God's word to strike us in some manner, because God's word always strikes during worship. God's word is calling us in the music, in the message, in the Scripture reading, in the prayer, in anything. When we worship, ears are open and eyes are on high alert. Do not let the weeds and thorns grow over our worship. God is speaking.

God calls us to a deeper understanding. A deeper understanding of God. We cannot just take our faith as it is. We cannot look to God and say, "Well, I

understand all I really need to understand.” That is like taking a tablespoon of water from the Atlantic Ocean, looking at it for a minute, and saying, “Now I know everything there is to know about the Atlantic Ocean.” People explore the Atlantic by getting into it. They observe the top, middle, and bottom of the Ocean, and still they have a limited understanding of it. We explore the Lord God by becoming intimately involved with God. We explore God by reading, praying, joining Sunday Schools, joining Life Groups, and discussing God, and studying God. We cannot know God any better through any other means. We can never know everything there is to know about God – God is immeasurable, unfathomable – but that doesn’t stop us from trying. God is calling us to explore him. God is calling us to delve deeper every day.

This year I joined a committee through our Presbytery, in which we interview pastors and candidates wanting to serve churches around Atlanta. We ask these candidates deep theological questions, things that most of these pastors who have been in ministry for 20 years might have forgotten. It is like going back to seminary for everybody, and it is fascinating how flustered the candidates might become. Attending these meetings has woken up in

me the need “to go back to seminary,” so to speak. I feel the need to reach deeper into faith and explore the thoughts of theologians who came before me. I love what has been awakened in me. I am reading and studying not just to feel prepared for these meetings – I am reading and studying because I want to know more about our God. I already have a masters and doctorate in pastoral ministry, but I sense the call of God, the challenge of God, to dare to know him more. So I try, and I’m having fun at it.

Do not let the weeds and thorns grow over our understanding, our faith, our relationship with God. God is speaking.

And, of course, God is calling us to ministry. Every time pastors stand up to talk about ministry, I think sometimes we come at it from a wrong angle. We pastors assume that all y’all aren’t doing anything. We assume that people in churches are just sitting there and not answering the call of God to serve. I know that a good majority of people in Morrow Presbyterian are connected with some sort of ministry. Like any other church, there are pew sitters. There are people who wish to ignore God’s call and would rather be quiet in church.

Well, I am not going to assume y’all do nothing. I

am going to assume to do something. We all have been doing something in God's name for the last year or for the last five or ten years. I believe God's call for us is to keep moving forward. Keep on keeping on, because your ministry is essential to the kingdom of God.

Maybe we feel tired. Maybe we feel as though we are the only ones who care. Maybe ministry feels like a chore rather than ministry. If God calls us to something, he doesn't call us to bore us to death. God never calls us to something that we get sick of and then we refuse to do ministry ever again. God has placed us exactly where God wants us. He moves through our talents, our ideas, and our words to make things happen.

God's call is for our ministry to be vibrant, not stale, so this means God may be showing us how to stay vibrant. God may be showing us how to kick it up a notch, just as Emeril Lagassi does with his dinners. Spice it up. Keep it fresh. Maybe we need others to get on board, in order to inject some fresh ideas into the ministry. Maybe we need to explore how others churches carry out ministry, so that we might have a better vision for our ministry. Maybe we need to listen more carefully to what God is saying to us, because our ministry might have to go in a different

direction that benefits God's church and kingdom.

God doesn't call us to boring, stupid tasks. Do not let the weeds and thorns grow over our ministry. God is speaking.

“Go to the ant, you lazy person,” Proverbs 22 says, “and consider its ways, and be wise.” Ants are busy creatures, because they have much to attend to. There is always a little bit here and a little bit there to do in order to keep the colony functioning. We don't have to run around like ants, and attend to every little thing. We do have to be attentive, though. God is speaking. God sees where the weeds are growing. God sees where the walls have cracks. Every day is our chance to go to the shed, get the tools out, and do some good work.