

The Tree, a Woman, and God's Purpose

On the day before this was written, the Praise Team that I directed at my church in Gaithersburg, Maryland sang for the funeral service of one of our dear choir members. Phyllis Holtkamp had moved to the local area in 2001 at the age of 78 and, in her few short years with us, was known for her wit, generosity, and singing ability.

The Tree

This morning, as has been my habit nearly every morning for the last 20+ years or so, I got up to begin the day with a walk and time to think and pray for about an hour. This morning, being Saturday, I had chosen to sleep late, so I was getting out around 7:30 am, more than 2 hours past my usual dawn or pre-dawn habit. The gray, barely lit morning was overcast and calm, with moderate rain. Thunderstorms had come nearby the previous evening. The rainy morning was devoid of other pedestrians or joggers, and only an occasional SUV on the street broke the silence in the still neighborhood.

As I rounded a street corner near my home, I began thinking how much the trees and plants and creation really needed the rain. (The previous month, March, had been an unusually dry month.) I reflected that God supplies the trees with needed rain and nutrients, and, similarly, God supplies us with what we need—water and food, as well as all the other elements we depend on for life. I'm a musician and an engineer, not a biologist, but the importance of this rain was clear.

A few moments later, I was walking along an adjoining street that borders a Forest Preserve of mostly deciduous hardwoods. Suddenly, I heard a large, sharp "Crack!" I turned and saw a large tree on the opposite nearby hill across a little valley starting to fall. The crackling sound continued like scores of wooden fingers breaking simultaneously as the tree's branches dashed on nearby trees and broke as the tree fell to the earth. The trunk collided with the ground with a final "Whump!" In all my years of early morning walks, this was the first time in my life that I had heard and seen a full-size tree in the forest fall to the ground due to natural causes. Although a previous lightning strike might have contributed to the tree's death, there was no lightning strike this morning, and there was no wind. The tree just fell over.

That got me to thinking.

1. The tree depended on God to supply its needs during its lifetime. Likewise, we depend on God to supply our needs during our lifetime. (Philippians 4:19)
2. The best thing a tree can do is to live out the purpose that God intended for it—to glorify God. The best thing we can do is to serve God by living and fulfilling the purpose God has in mind for us. The tree had sheltered God's creatures, had provided shade during warm summer weather, and had provided seeds for the next generation. The tree never worried about comparing itself to other trees; it lived the purpose that its Creator intended.
3. Even in its death, the fallen tree will continue to provide nutrients for renewal of the forest and will be a home for small animals and insects.

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4. God's timing is impeccable. This was another "divine coincidence"—that I was there at the exact moment to hear the tree fall in the woods. This is not the first time in my life that I have witnessed the unexplainable, unusually precise coincidence of God's timing.
5. Good thing I wasn't underneath the tree when it fell down.

A Woman

This morning's walk wasn't over. It was still raining as I walked on a street near the local community college campus. I was on the home stretch, with about 5 minutes to go. A van stopped in the street and a woman got out and approached me. (I am accustomed to people asking me for directions when I am walking near the college campus. Must be the gray hair.) She showed me a paper with an address on it and asked me how to get there. I told her she needed to make a U-turn to get to her destination. As we ended our conversation and she was getting back into her vehicle, it dawned on me that the organization name and address on the paper she had showed me was a family planning and abortion clinic in our area. I had no idea what her need was, but I said a prayer for her.

Scripture

Later, at home the same morning, I was thinking, "How does all this fit together—the passing of our dear choir member, the rain, the tree falling down, and a woman asking directions to a clinic?" As usual, I found the answer in the Bible, which marvelously brings things together. Ecclesiastes 11:1-8a, from The Living Bible, says:

"Give generously, for your gifts will return to you later. Divide your gifts among many, for in the days ahead you yourself may need much help.

When the clouds are heavy, the rains come down; when a tree falls, whether south or north, the die is cast, for there it lies. If you wait for perfect conditions, you will never get anything done. God's ways are as mysterious as the pathway of the wind, and as the manner in which a human spirit is infused into the little body of a baby while it is yet in its mother's womb. Keep on sowing your seed, for you never know which will grow – perhaps it all will.

It is a wonderful thing to be alive! If a person lives to be very old, let him rejoice in every day of life, but let him also remember that eternity is far longer."

Prayer

Dear Lord, thank you for the gift of life, and the mysteriousness of your ways. Thank you for supplying all that I need. Help me to know and live out your purpose for my life. Help me to be good seed in the daily work and ministry you have given me to do, for all the days you give to me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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