

Deep in the Woods

Genesis 17:1-7; 15-16 and Romans 4:13-25

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Our Lenten series theme for this week is “Deep in the woods: Called to Deep Commitment” and our scripture passages are about the deep commitment of Abraham and Sarah.

When Abram is 75 years old, God promises him that he and his wife Sarai will be the parents of a great nation. But 14 years pass and Sarai has yet to become pregnant. At this point, Abram is 99 years old and Sarai is 90.

Abram already has one son named Ishmael born to his wife’s slave, Hagar (although Islam acknowledges Hagar as his second wife). But Abram and Sarai do not have children together, despite God’s promise. Abram is called to deep commitment and continues to be faithful to God while he waits to receive God’s promise. God repeats God’s promise to Abram and renames him Abraham and his wife Sarah as a sign of their new status as future ancestors to many generations. God fulfills the covenant and Abraham and Sarah become the roots of a giant family tree.

Like Abraham, who lived to be 175 years old in Bible years, trees can live very long lives. Nevada’s Great Basin Bristlecone Pine is approximately 5000 years old! Trees are some of the oldest living organisms on earth, so they have a lot of wisdom to teach us.

In my last sermon, I told you about a miraculous encounter I had with a tree at Silver Lake Mennonite Camp. I was a camper there for 10 years before joining the staff for 8 years and I’m now the Chair of the Silver Lake Board, so the camp trees and I have a long history.

I loved to walk the forest paths at night without a flashlight. It was the only place in the world that I’ve ever felt safe walking alone at night as a woman. It was an immensely empowering feeling. I found that without a light, my peripheral vision adjusted to the edges of the forest and somehow kept me on the familiar paths between those whispering giants. Now, during the pandemic, our family is often compelled to visit the woods. We’ve been to many familiar and new forests this year.

Perhaps our family has been channeling the spirit of what were probably our ancient ancestors – the pagans of Northern Germany.

The early Germanic Saxons thought that temples, like the ones built by their enemy, the Romans, were inappropriate homes for the gods, believing instead that the divine lived in trees and sacred groves. These pre-Christian Germans considered it a “terrible act of impiety” to cut down trees, as this would offend the gods and spirits of the forest.

The spread of Christianity fundamentally changed the old ways of the Saxons. Charlemagne, King of the Franks and the eventual emperor of the Romans, launched a 32-year war against the Saxons at the end of the 8th century in order to consolidate his kingdom. But despite his best efforts, the Saxons resisted Christianization. Finally, Charlemagne devised a brilliantly heinous plan and cut down their most sacred oak tree, called the Irminsul.

When these tree-worshippers realized that no ill consequences came to the perpetrators of this act, many finally accepted baptism and the forest became essentially disenchanting, emptied of magic. The course of European history changed dramatically when the Germans came to believe that their new God had given humankind dominion over the earth. The newly Christianized Saxons were now free to make use of the rivers and forests. They allowed their animals to graze where trees were cleared and they cut down trees for their hearth fires and for building houses. They also destroyed forests to make room for agriculture. It has been a truly Lenten experience for me to reflect on the historical connection of Christianization with the devastation of our forests in the West.

But trees are not so easily defeated. (We all know this if we are familiar with the Ents, the giant treefolk in *The Lord of the Rings*, who rise up against the powers of destruction.)

Next to people, trees are mentioned in the Bible more than any other living thing. They are symbols of wisdom and knowledge and they mark the spot of important revelations from God.

The book of Isaiah uses the symbol of a forest to teach us about the resilience of God’s people and the eternal nature of God’s covenant with them.

Chapter 10 outlines how God will use the invading Assyrians to punish Israel for its sins, but that eventually Assyria will be defeated. The last two verses of chapter 10 read: “The Lord of hosts will lop the boughs with terrifying power; the tallest

trees will be cut down, and the lofty will be brought low. God will hack down the thickets of the forest with an ax, and Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall” (33-34). But then chapter 11 begins with, “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him” (1-2).

Isaiah uses tree imagery to announce the coming of a new king who is like a shoot sprouting from a decimated forest and the verses that follow describe how the reign of this new king will bring peace throughout all of nature where the wolf will lie down with the lamb and the leopard will lie down with the kid.

It’s interesting to note that the Hebrew word used for spirit here is “ruach” - the same word that is used for the spirit of God that swept over the abyss at creation. There is a cyclical nature to creation, with death being followed by new life over and over again, just like the cyclical nature of the covenant. This changes the way I look at resurrection. Sometimes resurrection is presented as a supernatural event – something imposed on the created order from above, like a miracle that defies the natural world. But resurrection can also be rooted in the natural world if we look deeply enough.

This week, I watched the documentary “What Trees Talk About” from CBC’s *The Nature of Things*, hosted by David Suzuki.

I found out that the Jack Pine and Spruce can be chopped down, but their roots will remain alive because of the nourishment they receive from the trees around them. The individual tree can appear dead, but in actuality its life continues below the ground because it is a part of a complex network of interconnected roots.

When a tree is weak and damaged, its community cares for it and nurses it back to health. But what we do to one tree affects the whole forest. If trees are clear cut or thinned out too much, it can be detrimental to the whole forest because of the pressure this puts on the remaining trees to pull the weight for everyone. It’s like they’re experiencing compassion fatigue!

I also learned about the rejuvenation of Aspen trees. Quebec biologist Annie DesRochers has done extensive research on the Aspen trees of Canada’s Boreal forest – a forest that stretches from the Yukon to Newfoundland/Labrador, covering more than half of our nation’s land mass. She and her team used high pressure water hoses to expose the root system of the Aspen to uncover how trees that appear to be individual trees above ground, actually form an underground

community. As DesRochers' team uncovered the Aspen's root system, they found that baby trees were attached to the root system of their parents. But Aspens don't just connect to their parent roots like an isolated biological nuclear family. Aspens also connect to total strangers they come into contact with, grafting together and forming wood that is common to both trees.

So why do Aspen trees do this? DesRochers had a theory that the two trees were connecting to help each other out. So, she did a little experiment. She found two connected Aspens and stripped the leaves off of one of them. Within weeks, the defoliated tree got back all of its leaves because its neighbour compensated for this loss by extra-activating its own process of photosynthesis in order to feed its friend.

But how do unrelated tree species interact with one another? Do trees only take care of their own? No. Ecologist Suzanne Simard researches the interactions between birch (a deciduous species) and fir (a coniferous species). She found that when these two unrelated species come into proximity with one another, they form cooperative relationships based on mutuality.

Simard says, "The more the Douglas fir became shaded in the summertime, the more excess carbon the birch had went to the fir. Then later in the fall, when the birch was losing its leaves and the fir had excess carbon because it was still photosynthesizing, the net transfer of this exchange went back to the birch."

Trees are an expansive and inclusive community of interrelated subjects who share resources beyond just taking care of their own in a family sense. What a beautiful metaphor for the church. We are not just the genetic offspring of Abraham, but a community of trees from different species, providing nourishment for those who lack it and receiving nourishment when our own resources are depleted.

I mentioned my involvement with the board of Silver Lake Mennonite Camp earlier. It was my privilege to serve with a woman named Wendy Janzen, who just finished her term as a board member. She was a pastor at St. Jacobs Mennonite Church for many years before becoming the founder and pastor at Burning Bush Forest Church. This church started as an option for people who are searching for a divine connection to nature. Burning Bush Forest Church is a member of a group of churches called the Wild Church Network. Like the German Saxons, they do not worship in temples, but outside in a way that connects them not only with one another, but with the natural world. They believe that we are not humans interacting with nature, but that all of nature, including human beings, are

interbeings within God's creation. I hope to worship with them in the woods someday soon.

These days our trees appear dead. The sugar maple on our front yard, only a few years old, has 3 dead leaves clinging absurdly to its branches. But, soon. So soon. The trees will remind us of their vitality and their immortal capacity for resurrection. Let us have the patience and faithfulness of Abraham and Sarah as we wait for these signs of life.

Let us also consider all of the community happening below the surface, connecting us all to one another the way the Jack Pine, the Spruce, the Aspen, the Birch and the Fir are connected. Thank you God for the wisdom and beauty of your creation and for all it teaches us. Amen.