

2021 09 19 The Roots Remain

Season of Creation II, Toronto United Mennonite Church

Texts: Jeremiah 11:18-20 - Let us destroy the tree with its fruit

Psalms 1 - Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked. They are like a tree planted by the water.

Video - Name That Tree - Bible Edition, featuring:

- Jonah's bush (Jonah 4)
- Fig Tree (Mark 11)
- Oak of Mamre (Genesis 13)
- Oak Tree that Snagged Ansalom (2 Samuel 18)

I couldn't preach without at least referencing these fascinating stories and images. Trees and their people are all over scripture.

What are we to make of all these trees? For one thing, humans and trees go together. Years ago I heard an interview with a researcher who tracked calendar designs around the world to find out which sorts of pictures were the most popular. She said that you could find the same scenes from nature depicted on the same calendars in the tent of a Tunisian warlord, a New York board room, an elite school in Goa. These scenes contain the following elements - a mountain, water, and trees. There's something about that scenic intersection of variables that offers deep appeal to people all over the world.

Several years ago, Sarah Nahar, the executive director of Christian Peacemaker Teams, noticed that each one of CPT's violence reduction projects involved the intersection between people, trees, and place. Whether it was Colombian farmers resisting the monocultures of palm oil plantations, or Anishinabe clanmothers resisting clearcut logging, or Palestinians struggling to protect ancient olive groves, or plant new ones in a grand gesture of hope.

It is the story of the Kurdish people of Sulaimaniya that sticks in my mind. My dear friend Kathy was there, visiting from Winnipeg as part of the Christian Peacemaker Team stationed there, invited to support Kurdish peacebuilding efforts. One day she decided to create a compost heap in their yard to handle some of the organic waste their kitchen produced. She asked around and encountered much confusion. Why did this White North American woman want to keep a pile of garbage in her back yard? She tried to describe what she was doing, describing the process of making soil, of vegetation rotting down, of new, rich hummus, you know, like you find at the base of trees in the forest.

But this was unfamiliar to many in the city. When Saddam Hussein brought death to the Kurdish people, one of his acts was to cut down the forests surrounding the cities, to make it harder for the Kurds to hide.

The book of Deuteronomy (20:19 ESV) teaches: *When you besiege a city for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. You may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down. Are the trees in the field human, that they should be besieged by you?*

A whole urban generation of Kurds had not seen that particular cycle of nature, that particular presence of trees. Well, in at least one city backyard, there is some new soil in Kurdistan.

People, trees and place.

Trees are everywhere in the Bible. And just like our world today, the safety and sanity of human beings is connected with the trees. The first Psalm opens with an invitation to picture a happy person, a blessed and successful person, who orients their life toward God, towards righteous life. This person will distance themselves from the ways of scorn and harm. And therefore, they are like trees, planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.

It is a simple image of wholeness. Those who turn their hearts and minds and eyes and hands to the work of God, the way of God, will be safe from fear. Meanwhile those who act with evil intentions are not like the fruitful trees, they are like the chaff, the part of the grain that we do not eat, that needs to be broken off and blown away into the wind, away. It's a wholesome image. But it's not the whole image.

Trees don't just grow by the side of the water, bearing fruit in due season. Trees overhang white beaches and salt oceans on distant islands. Trees intertwine with parasitic vines that choke the life out of them in rain-washed jungles. Trees grow up, in, on, and through granite and concrete, forcing their way towards the light. Trees crowd silent snowfields blanketing mountain slopes, and they stand beloved, one by one, in the back yards of children and in the memories of the adults they become. Ancient oaks lie buried in peat bogs. Weed tree roots delve into sewers. Transplants crowd out their neighbours.

Just like the trees, human life is gloriously complicated.

And there are another one hundred and forty-nine Psalms that explore the ecstatic heights and dismal depths of human experience in the painful process of living. The Psalms take us into the wonder and glory of God's creation. They take us also into the bitterness of defeat and the longing for vengeance.

Jeremiah relates. The prophet describes the sickening realization that his vocation of truth may lead to his death. 'It was the Lord who made it known to me, and I knew; then you showed me their evil deeds. But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. And I did not know it was against me that they devised schemes, saying 'let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, so that his name will no longer be remembered!'

Trees are torn down, chopped up, put to the fire, or the chipper, or just rolled away to rot. Boundary trees that marked the edges of fields or neighbourhoods for generations are removed in a day. Jeremiah's image of himself is a lamb, unresisting. But when he imagines his life's work to warn the people of God's words in a time of nationalism, war, and ambitious greed, he describes a fruit bearing tree facing an early death.

A tree, planted by the water. To be stripped of its fruits, sprayed with defoliant, the clumsy arm of the backhoe tearing at the bark, or the whole trunk efficiently plucked by the mechanical delicacy of the feller-buncher. People also suffer such indignities. And God's people know all about that.

We know it because in our midst are those who have survived it, and because we treasure their stories and their presence. We know it because our ancestors in body and spirit survived, or did not survive, the violence of dispossession. We know it because God's spirit joins us with those in other places who are holding on, or letting go, of their cherished place by the water's side, trusting always in God's enduring presence. People, trees, place. God's in all of them. And all are threatened.

This Psalm does not mention that threat. Whether as prayer or song, it promises a simple peace that we know is not secure. To dedicate yourself to the pursuit of God's goodness is no guarantee of being safe and secure like a tree by water. We know that water is easily poisoned, or drained, or dammed. Jeremiah knew that the tree was vulnerable. We know it, too.

The tree is more valuable as lumber. If it can be taken, sawn, packaged, labelled and sold, it has value. The water is better pumped, filtered, bottled, chilled, and sold. If access can be limited, the price is reliable.

The person who is oriented towards God, who meditates day and night on the beauty and order of the divine, who prospers and who gives without measure, that person would be better to be oriented towards fear. They should be concerned about the future, willing to pay for security, or for distraction. They will vote for the lesser evil. They will retell the simpler story.

Jacques Ellul wrote on this topic.

"Modern people are assuredly the most extensively protected by insurance, by attempts at controlling the future and by safety and medicine and guarantees of all sorts--yet they seem to be the most anxious people who have ever existed. They are afraid.

With the simplicity of truth, Jesus tells us how it is possible to live outside of this anxiety. Yet, that is precisely what modern people do not want, or more, cannot bear to hear. They cannot allow tomorrow to retain its secrets, cannot bear to have no hold upon it. Everything must belong to them. They want to have everything. They covet security and the future. And to that extent, they are dying of anxiety. They want to be master in all things and therefore cannot bear to allow the smallest reality to lie beyond their grasp."

I want to say that it's not wrong to exercise control in response to uncertainty and disorder. But when control becomes the expectation, the basic necessity for normal functioning, then we risk centering our lives on the need for power.

The emotion of fear is not the problem, and it is not wrong to experience anxiety. But a habit of acting on the advice of fear is a recipe for short sighted decisions and long term disaster. I think it's commonly understood that time is speeding up. Our bodies and brains and nervous systems are conditioned to expect faster and stronger hits of adrenaline. Our tools of communicating and organizing with one another are also where we get our news, which is cunningly filtered to our favourite flavours of soothing distraction or pleasant outrage. The emergencies of poverty, climate chaos, and human rights abuses, which have been generations in the making, all clamour to be solved and all offer no easy solutions.

So I have found it necessary to get out of that cycle. I have found it helpful to build a fire. To make a meal. To watch a sparrow. To observe a tree. The African-American heritage, the songs of the formerly enslaved Africans who took the vain Christianity of their oppressors and returned it to the root, they had a song. I shall not be moved. Like a tree planted at the water. Later generations modified the words, 'we shall not be moved', shared the powerful vision with those who were trying to tackle the daily emergencies and the horrors, and the needs.

Do you know how rare it is to hear singing at a protest these days? Shouting is easy. Singing is hard. You have to align yourself with others to sing effectively. You have to match your breathing and pay attention to your neighbour. It takes a lot of intentional preparation and a strong collective to sing in public.

This Psalm is intended to be sung. It's not a manifesto or a roadmap or twenty steps to fix the climate. It's a vision, and a promise, and a hope. It's an image of a tree planted by the water, generous branches holding up the clouds and dropping down the fruits we need. It's the promise that God's good world is there for us, if we will walk God's way. We need that promise at a time when forests burn, when healthy trees are chopped down, where Indigenous lands and water are poisoned. We need to imagine what it looks like to be a tree by the water, bearing fruit.

Because fruitbearing trees carry a seed. If the fruit has nurtured, the tree's seeds have spread. Trees spread their offspring in intricate and wonderful ways. Long before I knew how humans created life in this world, I knew some of the ways that trees brought their children into the world in hopes of fertile soil. Coconuts floating over the ocean. Sycamore keys spinning through the air. Apple seeds and cherry stones and other life-capsules.

Burn down the forest, and the pine-cones split open to spill their seeds. Cut down the tree, and the roots remain. And from the root, says the Bible, from the stump, comes a shoot. New life is what our God is doing, all the time, across this planet, with the same persistent and determined love that God shows in reaching out to each of us. I see you. I see your struggles. You are loved, and you are blessed.

*Blessed are the ones who do not follow the plans of the cruel, nor wander the maze of the disconnected, nor retreat to the luxury of the cynical
But instead, these blessed ones focus on the word of our God,
They constantly experiment with God's lifegiving ways
And they are like trees by the water's edge, bearing fruit in season, with no withered leaves.
They prosper in all that they do.*

*But it's not like that for the cruel and the careless
They have nothing to weigh them down, so the wind blows them away
Like waste paper.
When they need to reason and explain their ways, they wither,
And they can't handle the company of earnest and true people.
Because our God watches over those who try to do what is right*

And the path of wrongdoing pales in comparison.

As we close this time of reflection, we're going to sing our song of the month. When we sing, you don't have to affirm or even understand all the words in order for the song to do its work in your spirit and in the spirit of those around you. And for those of us who have a hard time singing, especially with others, I want you to know that it matters that you are there, offering up whatever voice you have to offer.

To praise God sometimes feels ridiculous. But I believe it is essential to cultivate the skill of singing, especially with others, and the habit of centering our efforts on God and the goodness that God lays out before us. To sing God's praise is to affirm that the Creator of Life is stronger than the threats and temptations that would turn us towards denying peace and resisting love.

Let's sing then, from Voices Together 849; *We your people sing your praises/Bon berger.*