

Trees – Rooted, Grounded, Watered

Psalm 1:1-3, Jeremiah 17:7-8, Luke 21:29-33

July Summer Series: Stop. Look. Savor. Lessons from Creation for the Long Haul

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Blessed are who do not follow the advice of the wicked... Instead they delight in the path of God. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.

Psalm 1:1-3, adapted NRSV

Blessed is the man who trusts in God, the woman who sticks with God. They're like trees replanted in Eden, putting down roots near the rivers - Never a worry through the hottest of summers, never dropping a leaf, Serene and calm through droughts, bearing fresh fruit every season.

Jeremiah 17:7-8, The Message

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Luke 21:29-33 NRSV

I've always loved trees. You may remember that during the pandemic and we experimented with this idea of Roofless Church inspired by Celtic writer JP Newell, I preached a series of sermons on redwood trees. What joy to be back outside under these coast redwoods and being open again to the ways God teaches us through the trees. In Celtic wisdom we remember that the earth is sacred. Every tree and bush, every flower and creature, every hill and mountain, every stream and ocean is alive with the Divine. The life within all life is holy, is pulsing with the divine.

In book *Sacred Earth Sacred Soul*, in the chapter of John Scotus Eriugena, Newell points out:

Eriugena said that the whole of the natural world is like a sacred text—and that includes the creatures and our creatureliness.... Eriugena teaches that there are two books through which God is speaking. The first is the small book; physically little, this is the book of Holy Scripture. The second is the big book, the living text of the universe, which includes the great luminaries of the heavens, the sun, moon, and stars; the earth, sea, and sky; the creatures of all these realms; and the multiplicity of life-forms that grow from the ground. We need to read both books, he says, the sacred text of scripture and the sacred text of the universe. If we read only the little book, we will miss the vastness and wildness of the utterance, everything vibrating with the sound of the divine. If we read only the big book, we are in danger of missing the intimacy of the voice, for the book of scripture calls us to faithfulness in relationship... (pg 88)

So let's explore the lessons from the Bible and nature. Panentheism, the concept of God or Spirit indwelling that winds through the wisdom traditions of all faiths. Different from pantheism which asserts that the tree is god or the divine.

Other than people and God, trees among the top most mentioned living things in the Bible. 266 times the word tree or trees in Hebrew scripture and New Testament. There are trees in the first chapter of Genesis (verses 1:11–12), in the first Psalm (Psalm 1:3), and in the last book of the Revelation (22:2). Jesus often uses trees in parables and places where events happen.

Many major characters and theological event in the Bible are associated with a tree. Trees are often signposts and gathering places, and they provide images of both blessing and a call to justice and repentance.

What can we learn? Let's look at three lessons these biblical images and stories and science can teach us.

1) Trees teach us to communicate with each other. There is an amazing aspect of some biblical stories that portrays trees as things that communicate. They clap their hands (Isaiah 55:12), shout for joy (1 Chronicles 16:33), and even argue (Judges 9:7–15). *7 When Jotham climbed up on the top of Mount Gerizim and shouted, "Listen to me, citizens of Shechem, so that God may listen to you. Then One day the trees went out to anoint a king for themselves. They said to the olive tree, 'Be our king.' "But the olive tree answered, 'Should I give up my oil, by which both gods and humans are honored, to hold sway over the trees?' The story goes on about the trees talking and arguing.*

Tree scientists have discovered something fascinating about trees: They really do communicate. They count, share resources, and communicate with each other using a system dubbed the "Wood Wide Web." In book *The Hidden Life of Trees*, author Peter Wohlleben says that trees communicate by olfactory, visual and electrical signals. They help protect each other by giving off a scent that can change the chemistry of neighboring trees. (Forward and pg 12)

It can be frustrating to try to communicate these days. Many people are holding onto their opinions and untested beliefs in spite of new evidence. For many, their fear and dishonesty are cloaked in mantles of patriotism and religion. (Rev. Jim Rigby, Facebook, 7.1.22)

Good communication can be inspired by trees and biblical images. How might our communication with each other be a source of strength and resilience? In times that are threatening basic freedoms and protections, the importance of communicating options and strategies that invite all to the table to speak, to have voice, matters.

2) Trees have an inner balance – They are rooted, grounded and watered to sustain life. In the book, trees maintain an inner balance. They budget their strength carefully and they must be economical with energy so that they can meet all their needs. They expend some energy growing. They must lengthen their branches and widen the diameter of their trunks to support their increasing weight. They also hold some energy in reserve so that they can react immediately and activate defensive compounds in their leaves and bark if insects or disease attacks. And the timeframe for trees is long. (Pg 25)

We too need the long view as well as a sense of urgency. In our lives, as a church, a community, a country and a world. The Psalmist reminds people to be watered. To send down those deep roots. A sense that the Spirit is in us and among us to be water deeply, to take time to be spiritually hydrated. And the time of growth, of stretching comes to. A balance. Notice how this balance is being expressed in your life.

3) Trees are social and bear fruit together. Trees in the Bible are referred to individually but there are also references in the plural, groups of trees. The most astonishing thing about trees is how social they are. The trees in a forest care for each other, sometimes even going so far as to nourish the stump of a felled tree for centuries after it was cut down by feeding it sugars and other nutrients and so keeping it alive. A tree's most important means of staying connected to other trees is web of soil fungi that connects vegetation in an intimate network that allows the sharing of an enormous amount of information and goods.

In the book students doing research found something amazing about photosynthesis in undisturbed beech forests. Apparently the trees synchronize their performance so that they are equally successful. And that is not what one would expect. Although each tree is unique, the rate of photosynthesis is the same. This equalization is going on in the roots. (Pg 15)

The reason trees share food and communicate is that they need each other. It takes a forest to create a microclimate suitable for tree growth and sustenance. Isolated trees have shorter lives. The stories told by Peter Wohlleben working in forests in Germany are profound and instructive. Science is reminding us what we know deep in our being. We are connected to the Divine and one another. We need each other. We seek to live into a vision inspired by Jesus invitation to the kin-dom, the reign of God. (pg 53)

This past week we have experienced ways our country is not acting like a healthy forest. There is a lack of vision of the common good and interconnectedness. Trees are guided by ancient truths that science is now helping us see and understand. The Bible offers a seed of the vision that is still being born. The "fruit" of that seed is not traditional religion but a radical and universal love that does justice. Trees remind us to pay attention to the ways the Divine waters us and helps us grow deep roots and wide branches. Trees communicate and are connected. This is solidarity for a vision God's shalom and the Beloved Community. Amen.

John Philip Newell, *Sacred Earth Sacred Soul: Celtic Wisdom for Reawakening to What Our Souls Know and Healing the World*. (Harper One, 2021)

Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate: Discoveries from a Secret World* (Greystone Books, 2016)

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