

Pentecost 6B
Peace, Seattle
June 14, 2015
Ezekiel 17:22-24, Mark 4:26-34

FULLY ALIVE IN CREATION

For the past four months we've been worshipping under the branches of this Tree of Life. From the beginning of Lent to today, we've traced the journey of this Tree from its origin in the first chapter of Genesis to its destiny in the final chapter of Revelation.

We've listened as this life-giving Tree has cropped up again and again in the Scriptures—

- as the gift of God in Eden,
- as the illuminating bush in Exodus,
- as the symbol of hope in Isaiah.
- as the tree which, planted by the waters, roots us so firmly in faith that we shall not be moved.

We've heard medieval legends about the Tree:

- of seeds planted in Adam's mouth as he lay in his grave,
- and how the three-trunked sapling that grew from those seeds was interwoven with God's prevenient grace, until, in the fullness of time, the limbs from this very Tree held our crucified Lord.

And today, on our final Sunday beneath these branches, we add two final images of the Tree:

- as the lofty cedar under in whose branches winged creatures of every kind build their nests,
- and as that pesky, resilient shrub which, though it begins life as a puny seed, grows and spreads its branches until it becomes a place of hospitality for all God's creatures.

My first Call in ministry brought me to the Redwood Coast country of Northwestern California and I still remember the excitement of seeing those ancient giants rising along Highway 101.

Walking in those majestic groves was like stepping into a cathedral.¹ The sheer scale of the Redwoods left me slack jawed and tongue-tied—towering over 350 feet, with trunks measuring 15 feet or more in diameter, some of which were seedlings when Jesus was just a toddler.

Ancient ancestors of this species—*Sequoia sempervirens*—have been reaching for the sky for tens of millions of years. Redwoods had been turning soil, air, and water into leaf, branch and trunk eons before human beings appeared on planet Earth.²

The greatest of the world's remaining Redwoods have names given to them. And a champion among champions was a tree in Founder's Grove called The Dyerville Giant.

As tall as a 30-story building at 370 ft, with a diameter of 17 ft., a circumference of 52, and weighing perhaps a million pounds, the Dyerville Giant was one amazing plant.

As I stood there touching its trunk it was easy to imagine it would be standing there for generations yet to come. But after a series of winter storms swept through the region in the winter of 1991, saturating soils and weakening shallow root systems, **The Dyerville Giant**, came crashing to the ground one night.

¹ <http://www.redwoodhikes.com/Humboldt/Founders.html>

² Read more about them at: <http://www.sempervirens.org/sequoiasemp.htm>

Word of the tree's fall spread swiftly, and foresters and biologists moved in quickly to study the tree and to take scions from its crown for grafting onto healthy seedlings, and so preserve the genes of the fallen giant. From the point of the graft onward it would be the Giant's "super genes" at work.

THUS SAYS THE LORD GOD:

I MYSELF WILL TAKE A SPRIG FROM THE LOFTY TOP OF A CEDAR; I WILL SET IT OUT.
I WILL BREAK OFF A TENDER ONE FROM THE TOPMOST OF ITS YOUNG TWIGS;

I MYSELF WILL PLANT IT ON A HIGH AND LOFTY MOUNTAIN.

ON THE MOUNTAIN HEIGHT OF ISRAEL I WILL PLANT IT,
IN ORDER THAT IT MAY PRODUCE BOUGHS AND BEAR FRUIT,
AND BECOME A NOBLE CEDAR.

UNDER IT EVERY KIND OF BIRD WILL LIVE; IN THE SHADE OF ITS BRANCHES WILL NEST
WINGED CREATURES OF EVERY KIND.

ALL THE TREES OF THE FIELD SHALL KNOW THAT I AM THE LORD.

When I hear these verses from Ezekiel, it's trees like the Dyerville Giant that spring to mind. Ezekiel's message paints a picture of a whole ecological subculture existing and even thriving under this great CEDAR transplanted by God.

It provided God's exiled people then, and it provides us now, with an image of the expansiveness of God's vision for the earth's future and another powerful image of the Tree of Life, in whose branches all peoples and all nations will find their true home.

In his prose poem entitled HEALING, Wendell Berry writes:

The grace that is the health of creatures can only be held in common.

In healing the scattered members come together.

In health the flesh is graced, the holy enters the world.³

For Berry, this trio of grace, health & creaturehood needs to be held together—held in common. When we remember this, participate in it and practice it, holy things happen.

The health of our forests is in question these days. As drought weakens trees and beetle infestations and other killers march north, dead trees multiply, turning national forestlands into tinderboxes. We brace for the long fire season ahead, and wonder where it is all leading.

The film Interstellar captures the sense of futility that abides when the health of ecosystems fails on a massive scale.⁴ In the Earth of a not so distant future, a mysterious blight has destroyed every cultivated crop but corn. Every other human priority pales in the face of one overriding goal: keeping Earth's remaining human population fed. The inevitability that, one day, corn, too, will fall victim to blight sends a group of space explorers in search of new planets which might support human life.

Interstellar is a cautionary tale. In the end, the faith which the story places in technological solutions is overstated.

How do we hold grace, health, and creaturehood in common?

How do we help one another fall in love with Earth again?

³ *What are People For?* Page 8.

⁴ Here's the trailer: <http://www.bing.com/search?q=interstellar&qsn&form=QBLH&pq=interstellar&sc=9-12&sp=-1&sk=&cvid=2efde4d71208452eb2d55b239368529d>

Another Berry, Father Thomas Berry, in his book The Dream of the Earth,⁵ speaks of the need for science and faith to COME TOGETHER to TELL THE STORY OF OUR COSMOS in a way that will captivate the imaginations and hearts of all peoples around the globe.

If we, as a human species, are to survive the ecological crises facing our planet and the consequences that follow in their wake, writes Berry, we need to open the window to the divine beauty and orderliness, purposefulness and interdependence which characterizes the natural world.

Could it be that this is what Jesus is about as he spins his tales today, joining bits of earth to the wondrous bounty of God's kingdom?

I BRING LOW THE HIGH TREE, I MAKE HIGH THE LOW TREE, SAYS THE LORD.
I GROW CEDAR SPROUTS AND MUSTARD SEEDS INTO PLANTS OF SUCH GRACIOUS
HOSPITALITY, THAT BIRDS OF EVERY FEATHER FIND SHELTER BENEATH THEIR
BRANCHES.

Congregations like ours are in the seed business. We're in the seed business because that's the business God is in. A group of us will be tending the pocket park at Fauntleroy & Juneau after worship as an extension of the stewardship that begins right here, beneath the Tree of Life.

Much of the time when we tend seeds, we're not sure how or whether they will produce a harvest. But we trust that, nurtured by the Holy Spirit, they will. And even those that fail or fall short, God can use to nourish the soil for the next generation.

Again, Wendell Berry:

The task of healing is to respect oneself as a creature, no more and no less.

To be creative is only to have health: to keep oneself fully alive in the Creation, to keep the Creation fully alive in oneself, to see the Creation anew, to welcome one's part in it anew.⁶

The trunk and branches of this Tree will be taken down this week. But within the cross that remains, the Tree of Life will abide, bearing fruit that will keep us yearning for God's abundant life to reach out to each and all.

Amen.

⁵ Sierra Club Books, © 1988.

⁶ *What are People For?* Page 8.