

11.5.2023 Sermon

Trees... | Romans 1:20

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

trees, leaves, god, xylem, grow, energy, roots, sunlight, fruit, life, shining, called, ground, forest, nutrition, brings, blessing, give, faces, surface

SPEAKERS

Rev. Terri Moss Witmyer

Good morning,

I was invited to choose my own adventure in the sermon today. That's the series that we're doing right now, where every preacher gets to choose what they're going to preach on. And I thought about what I most liked to talk with you about this morning. And I kept coming back to trees. I love trees. And I love talking about trees. And it turns out, the Bible also loves talking about trees. Maybe you've noticed, if you've read it, there's trees all over it. They are there and described and associated with person after person in the Bible, like character after character. And event after event, there's a tree there.

The Bible opens with a story set in a garden, and there are trees there; they are super important. And it finishes with a picture of the reign of God fully made manifest, and there are trees there.

Trees can be, we could look at them as a unifying theme throughout Scripture. They're symbolic of so much. They're written into Scripture very purposefully by theologians, who wrote the pages of Scripture in millennia past.

Interestingly, throughout the Bible trees are often presented as a counterpart, or a mirror or a foil for the humans who are in the stories. But rather, this morning, rather than looking at any particular scripture about trees, and rather than parsing the theological meaning of Scriptures where trees are—those are both very interesting and fascinating adventures, I assure you—but that is not the adventure I choose this morning. You're all along with me for this ride. What I would love to do this morning together is simply to meditate on what trees are like, as they live on this planet with us. And to read, in them, some wisdom for how to be, how to be as

beloved creations, living and breathing, and showing the beauty, strength, and glory of our Creator.

It has been said that creation is the first act of divine revelation that we know of. It's the first showing that God did by being the creator, long before written scriptures were penned. Tablet did whatever. Paul said in his letter to the Romans, that God's eternal power and divine nature are able to be clearly seen, through the creation, through what God has made. We're able to know the artist through their art, because every artist puts their heart and soul into what they make.

And we live inside of this art. We are part of it. And we live within the art of creation, the art of what God has made. And so, we're invited to know them by their works. So, trees—what do trees show us about being a work of art, from the heart and hand of the Creator? What wisdom for life on this planet is offered to us by this particular part of creation, but blessing of peace, pleasure, sustenance, and shelter are given to us, to humanity, as we live alongside these majestic living beings.

Beings might be a debatable word—things, whatever you want. Let's read some trees this morning and find the wisdom of the Creator written in the cells and structures. So, who here has a favorite tree? Raise your hand. A favorite particular tree that you love to look at, or maybe you identify with. I love it. So many of you are raising your hands. What do you like about it? Give me some stuff. What do you like about your tree? It flowers; it's beautiful. The bark smells good. Yes, yes. For you online, I'm sorry. I'm not going to repeat the gorgeous poetry that we just heard.

The beauty of the sun shining through the Japanese Maple leaves. Anyone else? A couple more. What do you love about your tree? Yes, yes. The shape of the pine, and underneath it is like a little house, a shelter. Okay, one more—but the shape of the tree planted in memory of her mom. And it's beautiful. The shape of the leaves is hearts. I missed some stuff. But yes. Yes.

Personally, there are some tulip poplars growing really tall and big just down the hill from our house. And this fall when the sun is shining and there's a bit of a breeze, I have loved to see their orangey-yellow leaves. They're just shimmering and dancing in the wind. And I feel like they're clapping and they're waving to me. And I also have to mention, honorable mention, I really, really love the sycamores that grow along the banks of all the creeks and rivers in this area. And their bark peels off, and underneath they have this shining pale complexion. And I call them the white ladies of the riverbanks, and they're just standing there so graceful. You see them everywhere you drive in this area. I love it. It just is like, yes.

Okay, so I would like for us all to take a moment to imagine this morning. If you're comfortable, maybe close your eyes and see in your mind. You're sitting, you're peaceful, you're just looking at your favorite tree. Or if you don't have a favorite one, you're looking at one that strikes you as worth staring at right now. I want you to see its form. See the way the trunk rises from the ground and splits into branches that hold leaves? See the hint of roots as it enters the ground? See the crown of it against the sky, whatever shape yours presents. Is it washing in the first blush of spring green? Is it completely green and full leaf on a hot summer day?

Is it painted with the fiery red, orange, or yellow of autumn? We're reading trees. Is it bare with snow outlining each twig, or maybe it's an evergreen that never drops its leaves but keeps them all through the cold?

Just take a deep breath with me all the way down to your toes, and let it out. Let's take another. One more deep breath. For me, there's a deep feeling of peace when I sit with a tree. You know, they're the oldest living things on Earth. They're designed to outlive our human lives by centuries.

So, if you'll just keep your tree in mind as we go, I want to share some things that I've learned about how trees live. I think there is wisdom for us humans. I will just give the caveat that I'm not a scientist; I'm an artist. And I kind of faked my way through high school biology, to be honest. But I read a bunch of articles and books and learned some things. It's like just scratching the surface. There's gold here. And so that's what I want to share with you.

And maybe some of you already know this stuff, and I love that you probably can go deeper. So first, breathing, lifting our faces to the sun, the top of the tree with all of its leaves is called the crown of the tree. Go back to that one before, please. Yeah. So, the leaves, as they wave to us on the ground, are opening up their faces. They're literally opening up their leaves to the sun and the sky. They're pulling in the energy of the sunlight into the tree through photosynthesis. There, that process brings carbohydrates, literally sugar food, into the tree for energy to grow and produce fruit.

They're breathing in carbon dioxide and exhaling oxygen, which is the byproduct of their energy production.

Did you know that there are literally little openings on the surface of leaves? There are some even on the trunk. But mainly, they're in the leaves, little openings where they breathe, where they exchange breath.

They take in carbon dioxide and breathe out oxygen. They really, in that way, are a balance for us as we're humans and all mammals and stuff that breathe oxygen.

Think about what you know, what can that say to us as humans, just thinking about those leaves lifting their faces to the sun and the sky.

And I think about what a change it brings to our souls when we turn our faces to the sunlight of love and blessing from our Heavenly Parent.

When I do that, how my will to go on is suddenly restored. Energy is energized when I turn my attention and acknowledgment to blessings, to the things that I can be grateful for.

I think about how the tree brings in energy from the sunlight, and I'm so much the same, both physically and spiritually. Sometimes I just need to tip up my face and let the sun shine on it.

And that's when I feel that I can breathe again, that breath that brings vitality back into my soul and my muscles, letting myself feel the love that, in reality, is pouring over me all the time.

But it really makes a difference when I tip my face up, both physically and spiritually. And I have to wonder, why do I spend so much time with my face downcast when that love is always shining on me? Always shining on you.

So, may we learn to open our faces to the sun in the sky, to the blessing and love that are pouring down onto us all the time.

So, when trees make carbohydrates from the sunlight and the air on their leaves, it doesn't just stay there in the leaves at the crown. Trees have this amazing system that carries that nutrition throughout the whole organism and beyond.

I love this so much. Have you ever heard of the xylem and phloem? Yes, high school biology, you guys. I didn't know about it when I was in high school. I probably was supposed to. Trees have, running through their trunks and branches and twigs and leaves, cells that are lined up with hollow centers, basically forming drinking straws, all the way from the very tips of the leaves to the roots underground.

They're called phloem. And then there's also xylem. They kind of do the same thing; they kind of do different things. I'm not trying to teach science here, exactly, so not going to totally explain that. But they're like drinking straws. And they can pull that nutrition, that energy to wherever the tree needs it.

They bring it to the areas that are growing, tree twigs stretching longer, and branches growing more girthy. They bring it to the blossoms that are producing fruit, and thereby sending seeds

into the world, to allow the tree to have offspring. They bring it all the way down to where the roots are growing underground.

And curiously, they're able to send care packages of energy and information to other trees that they're connected to in the forest. More on that to come.

So, when I think about the energy that I get from receiving God's love, from receiving the sunlight, and air, of God's love and blessing, and I wonder where it goes in me, in my life, I think about how a healthy life means that there are good channels for that energy. Sometimes, I think just to keep me alive for that day. That's an accomplishment. And that may be true for that day.

And then, other days, in different seasons, it's the energy that my life needs for the beauty of blossoms and the gift of fruit, the sweet spirit gifts of peace, and patience, and joy and strength and faith and kindness. And encased in that fruit is the possibility of spiritual offspring. That may be the life of the Spirit would take root in the ground of someone else's life.

And God's love and blessing or the energy that needs to go straight to my growth edges to all the places in my life where growth is needed and in progress. And so, it's kind of encouraging to me to think about, like all of the energy that I need, all of the building blocks to grow and to produce fruit, to maybe reproduce. It's not up to me to conjure it up somehow.

Sidenote, I grew up as a church kid. And I somehow got a message that like it was my job to be good. I was supposed to try really hard, like to do the good things and stuff. But this message of truly that energy production comes from outside of myself. That's encouraging to me that I don't have to somehow make it happen. But instead, the channel to receive that sunlight and send it to the growth edges is within me.

I don't have to make the energy, but I do receive it, somewhat by my choice, right, by that lifting my face. By opening myself to receive the love and blessing, it's always pouring down, whether my face is up or down.

I love it when you can see some of the trees' roots above the ground, don't you? They're beautiful. Go ahead, and I just picked a picture. There are so many. And it's just like a hint of what's going on. Because we usually don't see the roots that much because they're underground. But here's what the roots are doing under there. They're drinking up water. And like pulling minerals from the soil, from the ground.

And some are going down really deep, but many of them are growing laterally, just not far under the surface of the ground. And as they find water and minerals, vitamins for trees, the

tree drinks up the water through the xylem, through those drinking straws that go all the way from the base of the tree into every branch and twig and leaf.

And in a stunning defiance of gravity, even the tallest of trees pull water all the way up to the very top of them, bringing hydration and mineral nutrition throughout the tree. So, there's food coming from above, and there's food coming from below.

The roots also bring stabilization and balance to the tree, helping it to stay upright, no matter what's going on above the surface. And those drinking straws, the xylem, part of them, like along the cell walls, ourselves, or think something called lignin, which is like these really fibrous, woody cells that actually give the strength to the tree. So, it's like the very mechanism that's bringing nutrition and hydration from below is also giving it strength to stand.

And like when we think of a piece of wood, that hardness, that strength that it has, is from that lignin that actually is part of the cell walls of the xylem. I don't probably may be saying some wrong words, but it's the basic concept. And that's so profound to me because I think about how the water of God's presence is always to be found in the soil of the life that God has given us.

I think that when we put our roots down deep into the soil of our lives, into the ground where we're planted, really connecting with the life that we have been gifted, we will always find the water of God's presence because life comes from God. And so, our lives are the meeting place for us with God's presence.

Am I getting too esoteric? Okay, so what does that mean? I want to ask like, I think that all of us might answer a little bit differently because our lives are a little bit different. And our experience of living in our lives is unique to every single one of us. And because of that, how we meet with God is unique to every single one of us.

So, what does it mean to you to take hold of and really be connected to the gift of your life as you live it? For me, it's something like staying awake. Choosing to be awake to the gift of each day, instead of just putting my head down and getting through it. That's nudging at the edge of what it means for me personally.

I guess there's a place for getting through it; sometimes, that's all I can manage. But sometimes to eat up the goodness of this gift, that means somehow being alive to it, being awake, and noticing it. And that's when I find myself so much more deeply anchored when I'm in that space, so much more stable, able to suck up all the nutritious truth from the ground of my life, drinking the water of God's presence in our lives.

Remember how I said that the tree sends energy collected by the leaves not only to its own self but also beyond? It does that in the form of fruit. So that's great. But there's another thing that's like, it's more recently being discovered in the scientific community.

When the roots grow in the soil, they connect with networks of fungi. These fungi are connected to many other trees in the forest. The fungi live symbiotically with the trees; they receive packages of energy and take their cut, using about 30%, maybe, of what they get from the tree roots. But then they also send the rest of it on to other trees in the forest.

These networks are called mycorrhizal networks, with "mycorrhiza" being a fancy name for mushrooms. They form this network through the forest, connecting tree to tree, which we can't see with our eyes. In fact, it takes scientific equipment to even really measure it.

This is what's so cool: the tall trees, imagining a forest, right? There are these ones that have their crowns way up in the sky, and those crowns are like touching each other. Very little sunlight can get down straight to the bottom, to the floor of the forest. But there are young trees trying to grow, right? There are saplings that are only yay high, and they can't get enough light to get enough nutrition for themselves. So, these big trees wind up sending these care packages of nutrition to these young trees so that they can grow.

Isn't that amazing?

And in this way, entire forests are connected and operating in a communal manner. They're sending not only food and energy, but they're also sending information. Scientists are only figuring out how they're sending information. But when one tree is being attacked by an insect or something, it's able to send that information to other trees in the network, so that those other trees can start to produce whatever they need to defend from that attack before the insect even gets to them.

This is from Suzanne Simard, who studies this; she's like a leader in this field. She said it doesn't make evolutionary sense for trees to behave like resource-grabbing individualists. They live longest and reproduce most often in a healthy, stable forest. That's why they've evolved to help their neighbors.

And I know it's the same for us. We live longest and best when we are in a healthy, stable community, when we help our neighbors, when we receive help from our neighbors, when we share our resources together. And if I carry the metaphor of our roots into the soil of our very lives that we're gifted to live, we meet each other there, in our lives. Almost under the surface, it's not flashy. But we're able to share with each other when we are awake to the ground of our shared reality, in just common moments of life.

I'm really grateful that we in the cornerstone community get to live life together. There's so much more that I could say, but I'm going to end with just one of those trees in the Bible, the ones spoken of at the very beginning and the very end. It's called the tree of life. At the beginning, in the Garden of Eden, it's described as giving lasting life to the one who eats its fruit. And at the end, it's described as bearing a different kind of fruit every month, and also having healing in its leaves, healing for the nations.

Most theologians see this tree as representing Christ, the one who gives life to us, the one who can bring healing to all the nations, the one with abundance to give us so that we can eat and be full, so we can live, so we can heal and be whole.

In conclusion, I just want to encourage each one of us, when you have a chance, take a minute to sit and look at a tree and meditate on the life that God is giving us in every way that we need it. So many times, in my life, my prayer to God is, "I don't know, I don't know what to do, God. I don't know how to do this." And God's life-giving spirit, love, and blessing are right there with me in that moment, saying, "I have everything that you need."

And that is the case for each one of you too, my friends.