

The Healing Tree

Sermon by Dora Alexander

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Scripture text: Revelation 22: 1 – 5

Now if you have ever stood beneath the stretching branches an old tree then you know how much grace and power and wisdom they seem to hold. Their thick knotted roots sink deep into the soil and their branches and leaves seem to be reaching up to Heaven. And you know what? They are as diverse as people! I have seen Redwood trees in California so large there are highways going through them, so tall that the branches seem to disappear into the clouds! I have seen Baobab trees in the deserts of West Africa that have bulbous short trunks that hug the ground and look like they want to roll away. Some of them you would need 20 people holding hands to circle around them.

My love of trees started when I was quite young growing up in my rural community in the mountains of Western Pennsylvania. We had hundreds of tall oak and maple and elm trees that surrounded our little community and the pathways that lead from house to house and the school and church. My favorite however was one tall stretching pine tree just behind our house.

From the age of 3 or 4 I started climbing that tree with my siblings, higher and higher up into the branches. And we would say "mum we are going outside to climb the tree!" and she would say "How high will you go?" Now this was a really tall tree, well over 100 feet high. And we would say "Don't worry mum we won't go past the top!" And she would say "OK good!" (that is one of the benefits of a big family you know, the parents never were really able to pay that much attention to what we were doing.

But I will never forget one night a big storm blew up. Now we were already all in bed, and it must have been 10:30 or so at night and my older sister came tip toeing into my room and woke me up. She said "Come come I need to show you something." And I was very excited because I was only 6 or so and Emma was 11 and barely ever invited me anywhere! And she held my hand and we tip toed outside. And the air was thick and the wind was howling and the lightening was flashing and the rain was pouring down. And she said "listen!! God is talking to us!! We should climb up that tree so we can be closer and hear better."

So we ran over to the big tall pine tree and climbed right up in our pajamas! And I remember the

rain beating down and the wind whistling around. We climbed right up to the tippy top where at the trunk was so skinny that the wind whipped us around and around and I had to hang on with all my might. I told my sister that I was getting scared and that maybe God was angry but my sister assured me that God was happy and that in the rain was God's blessing and in the thunder was Gods laughter. Then just as I was starting to enjoy the bucking bronco ride I was getting in that tree and when my pajamas were so soaked that I started to love the pelting rain on my skin we heard a voice wafting up to us from far below. In the flashes of lightening we looked down and it was mother. Her long cotton nightgown was billowing in the wind like a ship's sail as she craned her neck up at us and ordered us "Down at ONCE" with sweeping gestures. So that was the end of that. Now I don't recommend trying this at home especially in a storm but I will never forget that feeling of being surrounded by God's laughter and feeling God's blessings washing over me in the rain from the top of that tree.

The passage as we heard _____ read for us is from Revelations Verse 1: "Then he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, in the middle of its street. On either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations."

Now when I read the passage for today the feeling of being in that tree came rushing back to me. I had never thought of it exactly that way but being up in that tree with the rain rushing down on me and feeling God's presence so closely, in such a real way... maybe at the age of six I was able to experience a tiny slice of that river from God rushing by the tree of life.

In this passage we see the distance between Heaven and Earth disappear. Until now in the book of Revelation we have heard about Gods home in the Heavens above the Cherubim but now the throne is set right in the midst of the new Jerusalem where the living waters stream from the throne of God. God is no longer far off but part of the world just as God was in Genesis. Here in the final book of the Bible we hear about the Tree of Life, which has not been mentioned since Genesis 3 where Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden.

What does that mean for us? What did it mean for the early Christians to receive and ponder on this image of God as now being right here and one with us... on our level... with life giving

water flowing from God's throne.

The passage talks about the tree bearing twelve kinds of fruits, that yield every month. Can you imagine what one tree would look like with twelve different kinds of fruit hanging from its branches? ****Name them**** (LAY OUT FRUIT) Not only did it have 12 different fruit but it produced those fruit every month. Even for us in this time of bounty and variety it is hard for us to imagine what that would look like.

Now up until very recently humans lived much more according to the seasons than we do now. Nowadays you can have an apple just about anywhere any day any time. The same goes for peaches or almost any other fruit. They can be brought here from Mexico or California or even from places as far away as this _____ from _____. But for most of the history of human kind people lived according to the seasons and you had to wait until your apple tree bore fruit to have any and if you only had an apple tree then you only had apples or perhaps you had to find a person with a peach tree to trade with so that you could have some variety.

Now as I reflected on this passage for today I wanted to learn a little bit more about who might have written it, who it might have been written for and what life might have been like at that time. Of course we cannot be sure but most scholars agree that Revelation was written by an early Christian prophet around the year 85AD.

This was a particularly difficult time for the early Christians who were experiencing what was known as the Second Persecution under Emperor Domitian who was from all accounts quite a nasty fellow. He forcefully removed Christians from their homes and land and demanded that they be put to death en masse. Whenever the country experienced hardship of any kind the Christians were blamed.

This passage was written to uplift and encourage a down-trodden people, to assure them that in the New Creation they would experience the peace, joy and abundance made possible by the river flowing from God's throne. Imagine hearing these words after a period of prolonged suffering, torture and desperation. Life expectancy at that time was around 35 years old. Many had probably seen their family killed and tortured and had little hope of ever living a better life. Beyond the healing and harvest evoked by the image of this tree, one can add stability to that list.

You do not plant a tree if you are about to flee into another land.

These words must have been truly balms on the tortured souls of Christ's early followers as they look towards the future for a better time. Clearly that is not our reality. No one is torturing our families and for most of us food is plenty. So what is our poverty? What is our displacement? What is our hunger? What does abundance look like for us who have so much? What does a tree bearing twelve kinds of fruit look like in our day and age? And how can we experience God's living water rushing into our world? The World Health Organization recently published some statistics about loneliness that took my breath away. Loneliness, people are dying of loneliness. At numbers never seen before at any time in history people are dying as a direct result of losing connectivity to those around them and perhaps one might even say to God.

- There is one death by suicide in the world every 40 seconds. (WHO)
- Suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death in the world for those aged 15-44 years. (WHO)
- Depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide. (WHO)

Is it not ironic that people have both never been more connected in terms of technology and forms of communication while at the same time we the human race has never felt more alone. Is that not very much like starving in a banquet hall or thirsting in a lake?

Later in the service we will sing one of my favorite songs "I saw a tree by the Riverside." The chorus of that song hits my heart every time. "I've got roots going down the water, I've got leaves growing up to the sunshine and the fruit that I bear is a sign of life in me." For me the water flowing from the throne is the lifeblood of connectivity I feel to the community and therefore to God. As humans we are intrinsically linked just like tree roots that spread their tentacles through the earth to find the sacred water.

I read about a tree scientist called Dr. Nalini Nadkarni who has done extensive research on how trees communicate and support each other through their root systems. □ When we think of trees we think of trunks and branches but under the surface, lies a vast network of tree roots often called neighborhoods. Dr Nadkarni describes them just like human neighbors that share sugar with each other.

Tree roots can also share nutrients with far-away neighbors by transporting them across thin

threads of fungi that, spread through the soil like giant underground spider webs. They penetrate the roots of neighboring trees, creating pathways that exchange the nutrients they need.

Sometimes something happens called root grafting. When tree roots rub against each other they can physically fuse together. When this occurs, neighboring trees – even different species - share one big circulatory system.

Trees supporting trees... creating a network a community of roots and support. The full picture of this amazing underground system is still not fully understand and there are many cases of tree support that have simply baffled scientists including scientifically “impossible” cases of sick and dying trees and even stumps being kept alive and nourished by neighboring trees.

Of course our tree friends also do much for their human neighbors. Did you know that trees actually combat climate change?

They actually absorb the carbon dioxide that is produced by our cars and factories. They store the carbon and release oxygen back into the air. In in one year one acre of mature trees absorbs the amount of CO₂ produced by driving your car 26,000km. That same acre of trees also provides enough oxygen for 18 people to live on.

Trees also save water with their roots by holding in the soil and cool cities by up to 10 degrees. We know of course that trees provide food but did you know that trees also heal!? Studies have shown that hospital patients with views of trees outside their windows heal faster and with less complications.

Probably the biggest surprise to me while learning more about trees was that trees reduce violence. City planners found that in a number of high risk neighborhoods and homes violence and conflict were reduced dramatically after planting trees throughout those areas.

Maybe the healing and abundance that we read about in the passage are not just symbols after all.

So I invite you as you begin your summer to reach down and tap into the life-sustaining water of the river of God; to reach across and allow your roots to graft with that circulatory system that supports and nourishes both the strongest and weakest. As our roots grow deeper may we also reach up higher. May we share in the improbable abundance of twelve fruits on one branch and participate in God’s work for the healing of the nations.

