

Stand in the place where you live - July 26, 2015

One of my favourite places in the world is in British Columbia. I haven't been there in almost 20 years but as a child we use to go to Stanley Park in Vancouver on a regular basis. It is a great park, with wonderful green spaces, a great aquarium and this lovely sea wall path for running, biking, or simply strolling along and enjoying the amazing ocean.

According one survey, it is the top park in the world. And if you ever get a chance, it is worth a day at least.

Among all the lovely things in this park, the predominant feature, and by far my favourite, is its forest. It is a wonderful place of old-growth trees, many of them cedars, some of them hundreds of years old and massive.

You can walk along the sea wall, enjoying the sun and spray, and then turn into the forest and within ten steps be in cool dark shadows. The canopy blocks much of the sun, and you see the streaks of light trying to burst through.

The air is richer, more fragrant, and I feel my body relaxing.

As Frost says, The woods are lovely, dark and deep -

There is something about that space for me. I could spend hours there.

And this, as I read Ps 104, is how I imagine the Cedars of Lebanon to be. A cool quiet place, fragrant and oxygen rich. Exuding life. The cedars don't grow everywhere in Lebanon, and unfortunately, through the last number of wars, there are even fewer groves than before. But the Lebanese government is attempting to regrow the forests. The cedar is a national symbol, and is on their flag, similar to our Canadian one.

The trees are amazing. Highly insect resistant, they were prized for ship-building and erecting important structures, most famously King Solomon's temple. And highly fragrant. Their oils are prized for various healing properties. From leprosy back in biblical times to being, in modern times, antiseborrheic, antiseptic, antispasmodic, tonic, astringent, diuretic, emenagogue, expectorant, insecticidal, sedative and fungicidal substance. An impressive list. Not sure I buy every one, or even understand every one, but there is no question that cedar oil is good for you.

But as I look at the forests that used to cover the mountains of Lebanon, and were world-renowned, I wonder how they started? What was the first tree, and how it took hold?

Here I should note that the sermon series is about witness trees in the Bible, and I chose to explore the Cedars of Lebanon, in part because there is a great U2 song that has nothing to do with any of this but simply shares the title 'Cedars of Lebanon.' So here we go, let's explore the Cedars of Lebanon.

Ezekiel 17 says in verses 22 -24 [22](#) Thus says the Lord GOD, "I will also take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and set it out; I will pluck from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one and I will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. [23](#) "On the high mountain of Israel I will plant it, that it may bring forth boughs and bear fruit and become a stately cedar. And birds of every kind will nest under it; they will nest in the shade of its branches. [24](#) "All the trees of the field will know that I am the LORD; I bring down the high tree, exalt the low tree, dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will perform it."

This has been a hard one for me. It sounds so lovely, and so positive doesn't it? God will take a sprig and plant it, and it will flourish. And that is what we want, right, for God to plant us and make us flourish? But I am not sure I like it. In fact, I am sure I don't like it. I don't really want to think about it.

God is going to take a sprig and plant it. Wherever God feels like it. And God will bring down the high tree and make the low tree flourish.

But I want to choose where I go. I want to determine my fate. I want to decide the path of my life. I don't know about you, but I haven't always liked my current circumstances, the trajectory of my life. Whether it is my relationships, or my career path, I don't always feel in control. Correction, I rarely feel in control.

And I don't like it. And that is the way it is supposed to be.

Let's read a section of Ps 104 again:

13 From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

14 You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to use,^[f]
to bring forth food from the earth,

It is a beautiful poem, with lovely images of a vibrant, growing world. And everything is controlled by God.

Loss of control. Loss of my control.

So, God determines where they are planted. OK, perhaps I can accept that. I don't always get to choose my location, my surroundings. Fine. I will deal.

But let me figure out how to grow, what I need to be stronger. I want to make decisions about building character and growing as a follower of Christ, as a husband, as a father, as a leader. I will determine the next steps. What? No?

If we look to the example of the cedars of Lebanon, they are placed high up in the mountains, not cultivated, and then also not farmed. These trees depend on rain and sun, not irrigation or other farming methods. As C.H. Spurgeon says, and I found much of what he wrote on this passage helpful, if somewhat archaic in language, he says, "I note that they are not dependant on man for watering."

So not only do we not get to choose where we are placed, we are wholly dependant on God for nourishment.

How many of us know Psalm 23, and struggle to take it seriously.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

Here, in Psalm 104, verse 14, among others, the Psalmist is essentially saying, "the Lord is my arborist, I shall not want."

What ever analogy we explore in the Bible, it seems to come back to the same idea. We not only can, but should, but *must*, wholly depend on God for sustenance.

In my own life right now, I am looking for work. I am making contacts, having conversations, crafting resumes. It is a full-time job and I am attempting to be quite strategic about it. It's mentally draining work.

And I confess, I really struggle not to **self**-nourish, not to figure out solely what I need and how I am going to get it.

One of my slowly developing spiritual practices, and perhaps I should simply call them practices since I believe all of life is holy, is to pray prior to having a meeting or submitting a resume. And I attempt to **not** make it the sports prayer of “Lord help us to win” but to be open to what the Spirit is saying, and to enter the conversation with a willingness to hear the other person, not simply to direct the conversation. It is hard for me. I think strategically, politically. I look for the angle in a situation.

But if I believe that God has placed me where I am, like that sprig, and God is doing the watering and the ‘sunning’ - Didn’t quite know how to verbize that one - perhaps I shouldn’t have - then I need to enter the conversation trusting that God will direct it, and I don’t have to.

So here we are, placed where we didn’t choose, and cared for through God’s provision not ours.

So what’s the upside? Well, if we look at these trees again. They are placed on the top of mountains, unsheltered, exposed to all the elements, rain, snow, lightning. So it gets better then? Sounds great doesn’t it?

So far I may have painted a less than positive picture of the life of a cedar. And perhaps it isn’t all easy.

But then I remember the forest in Stanley Park, and the stories and pictures of the cedars of Lebanon. These trees soar for hundreds of feet, and last for a thousand years. They provide shelter for birds, and shade for many animals. They have been treasured for temples and grand sailing vessels. Majestic and mighty.

And so I look at these passages and I wonder, how I am called to be?

And hence the title of this sermon. Stand in the place where you live. - I confess I ripped it off an REM song, which I won’t sing here. You’re welcome.

But it speaks to acknowledging the place where you are, where you live, move, and have your being. It is in this place, that you must choose to be.

And as I explored this passage, and the others referencing the cedars of Lebanon, it became clear that this was a key message.

Yes, we often don't choose the place where we are, and we don't have what it takes to nourish ourselves, and our surroundings may not always be comfortable. But if we choose it, if we open ourselves up to being exactly where we are, then as Psalm 92 says:

12 The righteous flourish like the palm tree,
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.

13 They are planted in the house of the Lord;
they flourish in the courts of our God.

And I was reminded of Matthew 5 verses 3 - 5, and 14 - 16, this time out of The Message:

3 "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

4 "You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

5 "You're blessed when you're content with just who you are—no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

14-16 "Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.

Simply choose to be in the place where you are, trust in God. Part of me bristles at the phrase "trust in God" because too often people use 'trust in God' as an excuse or reason to not act, either on their own behalf or others'. As if they believe we are called to passivity, or at least justified in our complacency. But the passage in Psalms isn't about passively waiting, but actively trusting. And there is something about trees, especially cedars and other large evergreens. They appear to simply be in one place, unmoving, content perhaps. But they are actively growing, developing, strengthening.

These cedars don't simply sit and wait for everything to happen. They intentionally seek out water and nutrients. For the first year they show little sign of growth

because they are establishing a solid root system, going deeper, building a foundation of support.

And these are tall, broad trees, soaring upwards towards the light.

Or as the Sermon on the Mount puts it, 'Now that I have put you there on a hilltop, shine! Be generous with your lives.'

I find this all quite difficult. I want to be the master of my own fate, to choose where I will stand, where I will place myself, in regards to work, relationships, or any other facet of my life.

We are to trust that we are placed where we are to be placed. And we are called to stand there, open to receive nourishment from God, and open to offer nourishment, shelter, and shade to others. And then we will flourish like the palm tree and grow like the cedar in Lebanon. **Planted in the house of the Lord.**