

## "Trees by the River"

*Second in a series on Being a Tree of Life*  
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Ezekiel 47.1-12

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Alan Jacobs studies literature. He writes this,

*The Bible is a story about trees. . . . If you understand the trees, you understand the story.*<sup>1</sup>

Last week we listened to two of those tree-stories. From Genesis, the beginning in Eden's Garden, filled with trees beautiful and delicious. From Revelation, the ending to which God is moving all things, where the Life-Tree gives fruit in every season and has leaves for healing nations.

Today, another tree story, part-way through the Bible. Here's the scene. Jerusalem and the Lord's Temple had been destroyed years before. God's people were broken and lost. So God gave the prophet Ezekiel this vision. Within it, you'll hear echoes of Genesis and a preview of Revelation. The City is rebuilt, and a new Temple. A guide is showing Ezekiel around.

Picture this.

*He took me back to the entrance of the Temple. There, water was going out from under the Temple's terrace, eastward. . . .*

*As the man went out eastward with a line in his hand, he measured 500 metres and got me to pass through the water, ankle-deep water. He measured 500 and got me to pass through the water, the water being knee-deep. He measured 500 and got me to pass through the hips-deep water. He measured 500, a torrent that I could not pass through because the water had risen, swimming water, a torrent that could not be passed through.*

*He said to me, "Have you seen, young man?," and got me to go and return to the torrent's bank. As I returned, there — on the torrent's bank, very many trees, this side and that. He said to me, "This water is going out towards the eastern region, going down to the river valley, and coming to the sea, to the sea of polluted water. The water will become healthy. Any living being that moves will live wherever the great torrent goes, and the fish will be very abundant because this water comes there. It will be healthy, and anything will live where the torrent comes. Fishermen will*

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<sup>1</sup> From Jacobs' delightful website, *The Gospel of the Trees* ([www.gospelofthetrees.net/about](http://www.gospelofthetrees.net/about)). It's a mosaic of quotes and images all about trees.

*stand by it from Gedi Spring to Eglayim Spring, a place for spreading nets. In kind their fish will be like the fish of the Sea, very abundantly great. But its swamps and marshes will not become healthy; they are given over to salt."*

*"By the torrent there will grow, on its bank this side and that, every tree for food. Their leaves will not wither, their fruit will not come to an end. By their months they will produce, because their water is going out from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food and their leaves for medicine."<sup>2</sup>*

This is God's word of promise.

And we get to go down the river with God.

## II

Last Sunday I talked about how church life as we've known for a long, long time has been, for quite while, slowly collapsing. With the pandemic, I fear, this collapse has been accelerated. The pandemic will end (someday!). I don't think church life will be going back to how it used to be.

Let's grieve about this. Admit that we are disoriented. Realize that none of us are experts. We're more like explorers, sometimes getting lost, but finding new things. Also, experimenters, trying things out, learning from what works and what does not.

I'm using trees to imagine us as church-congregations, folks gathered together by Jesus. They say we are "the body of Christ." I'm thinking we are a tree of Christ too.

Picture our "fruit" and "leaves" being what others see of us and what we give to bless them. "Fruit and leaves" are our life for the world, our mission with Jesus in the places he is at work.

"Fruit and leaves." What might ours be?

## IV

As we move into this future God is making for us, we need to shift how we see the work we do *outside* our little community of Jesus' disciples.

We are used to thinking this way. We're a congregation. We do things together, with

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<sup>2</sup> Ezekiel 47:1-12, translated by John Goldingay in The First Testament: A New Translation (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2018). I've left out verses 2-3, which describes how the prophet left the Temple complex. It's not necessary to the story, and can be confusing. I've also made some changes to Goldingay's translation for clarity. His "house" I've translated as "Temple." "Wadi" I've translated as "torrent," a term more familiar to my listeners.

and for each other. And we do things beyond our congregation. We call this “outreach” or “mission.” In this picture, we see God creating the church, then giving the church a mission in the world. We assume this is just the way it is.

The Bible gives us a different picture. God has a mission!

God makes the world! God loves the world! God loves our communities, our neighbours. And, God loves us. So God is restoring, remaking, healing, mending, reconciling everything. God is bringing peace, wholeness, completeness, health. Shalom. This is God's mission. Jesus is the decisive moment in God's mission-work. He is the “turn-around” who makes all this happen.

God creates the church—in small, particular, congregations of Jesus' people—for God's mission! God's mission is already happening. Strangely and wonderfully, God loves to share God's work. So God makes us, church-congregations like ours. God delights in us sharing with God in mission.<sup>3</sup>

V

So stop “coming to church!”

*“Of course! We can't! The building's closed.”* But when we're able to get our bodies together, still stop “coming to church.”

We're gathering online. This is good. This isn't “coming to church.”

You *are* the church. We are the church. We *are* the church together, when we are *gathered*. We are the church scattered, when we are *deployed*, sent.

Like an inhale of breath, the Holy Spirit brings us together. Like an exhale, the Holy Spirit breathes us out, into our world, onto others. . . . Okay, in Covid-times, that's not the best analogy. Still, you get the idea. If you just suck air in, you die. If you just push air out, you die. Breathing needs both. The church is alive when it breathes in, and breathes out.

Actually, it's our physical breathing flipped. Breath in—the church comes together, and the Spirit *fills* the air with oxygen-energy. Breath out—the church deploys, and the Spirit blows each of us to share that energy on mission with God.

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<sup>3</sup> Christopher Wright put this very well. *“It is not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world but that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission—God's mission.”* He was paraphrasing from J. Andrew Kirk's 1999 book, What is Mission? Christopher J. H. Wright, The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity, 2006), 62.

You know this: *Wherever I go, God is already there. God, help me notice.*<sup>4</sup> When we come together, we rejoice in God who is present. We learn from Scripture, song and prayer what God's Presence is like, the sorts of things God is doing. The Spirit makes us more like Jesus, so we can be attuned to God. Then we go, sent to notice wherever this God we've met here is working out there.

We talk about "*our many neighbourhoods.*"<sup>5</sup> You don't have to go far to find God. God is where you already are living, working, learning, playing, serving. God's mission is happening among the people you are already with. Joining in is not adding more to your already-full life. It's finding God's life in what you're already doing.

## VI

When the church breathes out, we scatter. We also do things together. Like our *Project Welcome* to support refugees, the *Inverhaugh Foodgrains Bank* field, and knitting *Prayer Shawls*.

A few of us get really involved. The rest are bystanders. We've not seen these things as core to who we are. God's mission for the world needs to be central to who we are together.

I recently learned about "anchor causes." An anchor cause is a specific need. A whole congregation shares in God's mission for that need.<sup>6</sup>

We can't do *everything*. Together, we can share in doing *something* with God.

What could our anchor cause be?

1. What need is there?

Where is God already at work? Listen! Pray together. Listen for what God is saying to us. Listen to our neighbours, community leaders, other congregations, agencies. Listen for what interests and passions God is giving us?

2. Where is there a gap?

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<sup>4</sup> This is from the Presence Project, which I'm leading for the United Church of Canada and our congregations have been taking part in for a few years. See [presenceprojectnetwork.ca](http://presenceprojectnetwork.ca).

<sup>5</sup> Elora United Church's mission statement includes this line: "We are . . . reaching wider to share blessings in our many neighbourhoods."

<sup>6</sup> See Jeff Lockyer, *Finding Our Way: Reclaiming the First-Century Church in the Twenty-First Century* (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2021), 35-42. Lockyer writes out of his experience leading Southridge Community Church in St. Catharines, Ontario.

We don't need to do what others are already doing. We might be able to come alongside them.

Can we offer something that is missing? A new focus or perspective? New energy?

3. Will this form relationships?

Too much "mission" has been some doing things for others, without really knowing or being with them. Instead, can we come alongside those who are experiencing this need, with mutuality and sharing God's work together?

4. Can the whole congregation share in this?

An anchor cause is a whole-congregation focus. Can people across ages be part of it? Can it draw on a variety of gifts?

5. Is God giving us what we need?

Do we have resources, abilities, experiences that can help? Are we people who can do this work, and do it well?

6. *Always keep asking, "God, is this part of your mission of bringing peace, wholeness, completeness, health, shalom? Do you want us to join in?"*

Through this pandemic, many needs in our community are being exposed. Might one of these become our anchor cause in our mission with God?

## VII

We are a tree of Christ. Like in Ezekiel's vision, we live by the torrent of God's flowing love. God is bringing healing and vitality into even the most polluted places. God grows us with leaves and fruit to share.

So I don't worry about the church's future. God's love is not changing. God's mission is not over.

We're changing. Maybe God wants us to do new things now. Maybe God wants us to be different. As our communities change, God might shape us differently for the sake of God's mission. Yes, all this change is hard.

God's mission for the world, including our little pieces of it, is not finished. So I doubt God is finished with our little tree either.

Amen.