

"The New Tree"

Seventh in a series on Being a Tree of Life
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Isaiah 10.33-11.10¹

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The empire prowls the borderlands with striking force. Arrogance astonishing. From the northlands of Lebanon, among its forests of imperial cedars, the enemy readies to lunge.

This is not about contemporary events.² Though if you hear echoes. . . .

May the Spirit speak to us as we hear
God's Word, from the prophet Isaiah.

Look! The Lord GOD of the heavenly forces is chopping off the branches with a crash. The highest ones are about to be cut down and the exalted ones laid low. He will strike down the forest thickets with an axe, and the mighty trees of Lebanon³ will fall.

A shoot will grow out from Jesse's stump. A branch will spout from his roots. GOD's spirit will rest on him: a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of planning and strength, a spirit of knowledge and awe of GOD.

He will delight in awe of GOD. He will not exercise authority by what he sees, nor decide by what he hears. He will exercise authority with faithfulness for the poor, and decide with rightness for those who suffer in the land. He will strike the land with the mace from his mouth, and by the breath of his lips he will kill the wicked. Faithfulness will be the belt wrapped around his hips, and truthfulness the belt around his waist.

The wolf will live with the lamb. The leopard will lie down with the young goat. The calf and young lion will feed together. And a little boy will drive them. The cow and bear will graze. Their calves and cubs will lie down together. A lion will eat straw like an ox. A baby will play over the cobra's hole. Toddlers will reach right over the snake's den.

No more will they harm or devastate anywhere on My sacred mountain. The land will surely be filled with the knowledge of GOD, just as water covers the sea. On that

¹ I've done this translation, using the Common English Bible as my base, and referring to John Goldingay, *The First Testament: A New Translation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2018).

² We were into the second week of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

³ Literally, "Lebanon will fall." Lebanon was known for its great forests and trees. I believe that's what's being referred to here, rather than the collapse of the nation or territory.

day, Jesse's root will stand as a signal to the peoples. The nations will seek him out, and where he lives will be full of splendour.

This is God's Word, the promise of Israel.

I

It's all a dream, right? I mean . . . you know . . . the world these days. It was no less a dream back when Isaiah promised this. God's People were done for. Their line of kings from David down had rotted from the inside out. The all-devouring superpower was poised to strike.

But then, this promise. Something new! In the fallen, trashed, burnt-over desolation . . . life!

Where all had been banished, a new tree grows. Like before, but different. Decisively different. This King for God's People is blanketed with God's Spirit. So he rules well, with all the qualities needed for good government. (Think "good government" is boring? What's it like without it?) His rule is the wisdom of God. The poor, his number one priority. Relieving suffering, his agenda.

The result? The Kingdom of Peace, in a world craving it. This King, Messiah. The tiny, fragile sprout of green. The Child leading. The Tree of Life.

We are his, and because we belong to Jesus, we are a tree of his life.

II

Today I'm finishing up my look at trees. The Bible itself uses trees to tell the story of God. So learning from prophets *and* arborists, I've been wondering what trees can teach us about being congregations — trees of life — these days.

Let's review. Imagine we are a tree of Jesus' Life.

Picture the 3 main parts of a tree: roots, trunk and branches, leaves and fruit. I've used

- roots to talk about our life with God,
- trunk and branches for our life together, and
- leaves and fruits for our life for the world.

Think of Jesus' love commands. He tells us,

- love God with all that we are.
- love one another within his community of disciples.

- love our neighbours. Jesus grows our idea of "neighbour" to include anyone in need. I'm thinking "neighbour" includes "all creatures great and small," the "all my relations" idea in many Indigenous philosophies.⁴

- he also says, love our enemies.

Love is not so much a feeling; feelings come and go. Love is action: for God, neighbours, enemies, creation, one another.

When this happens, we glimpse the Peaceable Kingdom which Isaiah described. Here and now, we experience peace, because we are with Jesus.

- We abide, or live, in Christ.
- We are the Body of Christ.
- We are on mission with Christ.

I've been thinking about practices that help us tend to our tree.

- We tend to our roots, through daily prayer and worshipping together weekly.
- We tend to our trunk and branches, by sharing joys and sorrows, and by learning peace through forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation.
- We strengthen our leaves and fruit, individually as we scatter to serve others

⁴ Thomas King writes, "'All my relations' is the English equivalent of a phrase familiar to most Native peoples of North America. It may begin or end a prayer or speech or a story, and, while each tribe has its own way of expressing this sentiment in its own language, the meaning is the same. 'All my relations' is at first a reminder of who we are and of our relationship with both our family and our relatives. It also reminds us of the extended relationship we share with all human beings. But the relationships that Native people see go further, the web of kinship to animals, to the birds, to the fish, to the plants, to all the animate and inanimate forms that can be seen or imagined. More than that, "all my relations" is an encouragement for us to accept the responsibilities we have within the universal family by living our lives in a harmonious and moral manner (a common admonishment is to say of someone that they act as if they had no relations)." Quoted in Walking Together: First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum (Government of Alberta). www.learnalberta.ca/content/aswt/well_being/documents/all_my_relations.pdf

within our many neighbourhoods, and together through an anchor cause (that's something to which our congregation commits its focus, energies, and resources).

III

As I wrap this up, I realize that thinking of these different parts separately is helpful. But always remember, a tree is a tree. It's a single organism. The whole tree must be healthy.

Same with a congregation. Sure, many of us are drawn to outreach, others to relationships, and others to spirituality. Yet these all need our care and attention. We are one tree.

United Church congregations love focussing on "trunk and branches" stuff, our community together. We are passionate about our "leaves and fruit," especially serving those in need and acting for justice. I don't think we're so good at our roots, our "life with God." I think our roots have been weak for a long time, and need special attention.

Even so, let's tend to our whole tree. It all needs attention, care, and mending. This pandemic has weakened our whole tree. And, it's exposed some un-health that was in us before, too.

IV

Another thought. I've mentioned Suzanne Simard before. She's a botanist in British Columbia, who's exploded our understanding of how trees connect within a forest.⁵ If you read the United Church's *Broadview* magazine, last month's had a story that included her.⁶

Here's a brief video about some of her discoveries.⁷

Trees may look like solitary individuals, but the ground beneath our feet tells a different story. Trees are secretly talking, trading and waging war on one another.

They are doing this using a network of fungi that grow around and inside their roots. The fungi provide the trees with nutrients and in return they receive sugars. But scientists have found this connection runs far deeper than first thought. By plugging

⁵ suzannesimard.com

⁶ Alanna Mitchell, "Japanese method can grow forests 10 times faster — and help heal our planet" *Broadview* (February 24, 2022). broadview.org/miyawaki-method

⁷ "How Trees Secretly Talk to Each Other" BBC News online (June 28, 2018). www.bbc.com/news/av/science-environment-44643177

into the fungal network, trees can share resources with each other. The system has been nicknamed the Wood Wide Web.

It's thought that older trees, fondly known as mother trees, use this fungal network to supply shaded seedlings with sugars, giving them a better chance of survival. Those trees that are sick or dying may dump their resources into the network which might then be used by healthier neighbours.

Plants also use fungi to send messages to one another. If they are attacked, they can release chemical signals through their roots which can warn their neighbours to raise their defenses.

But like our internet, the Wood Wide Web has its dark side too. Some orchids hack the system to steal resources from nearby trees and other species, like the black walnut, spread toxic chemicals through the network to sabotage their rivals.

Arboreal cybercrime aside, scientists are still debating why plants behave in such an altruistic way.

The hidden network creates a thriving community between individuals. When you are next in woodland, you might like to think of trees as part of a big superorganism chatting and swapping information and food beneath your feet.

∨

We are a Tree of Jesus' life. But we're not the only tree in the forest.

Jeff talked with us about these amalgamation conversations beginning, including Bethany, Elora, and maybe Alma United Church congregations. These individual trees are already connected in the forest. We're connected within the United Church of Canada. We're connected through our nearness to one another. We're connected in our area, with other congregation-trees of different traditions: Anglican, Presbyterian, Baptist, Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, and others too.

We're already connected in networks of sharing and support. And, I hope, not much competition against each other. Most important, we share in the one Jesus, and are filled with the one Holy Spirit.

I think these amalgamation conversations are good. If we can join our different strengths, and share in one another's weaknesses; if we can see a common vision and hope for a new life together; then I think our abiding-in-Christ roots, and our body-of-Christ trunk and branches, and our mission-with-Christ leaves and fruit, will be stronger, richer, and healthier.

If this new tree grows, our tendency will be to focus on our "branches and trunk." Of course, we'll need to become a community of people in relationship together. And I think we'll pay attention to our "leaves and fruit." What is our mission with Christ in our many neighbourhoods? What might our anchor cause be? Important stuff.

But we can't forget our roots. Remember, the network in the forest is through the roots. Roots anchor the tree against storms. Roots nourish the tree.

We are only a tree of life, as we are connected deeply into Jesus, the Tree of Life.

He is a bit like that "mother tree" Suzanne Simard talks about. We will only have life together, if we belong to him. We will only bless our world, if we go with him. We will only live, as we live in him.

Jesus, the small, unexpected Sprout, who brings the Peaceable Kingdom.

Jesus, the Tree of Life.