

Rev. Lisa Schrott
Matthew 13: 31-32
Ezekiel 31: 1-7

Captivated by Beauty: The Depth and Spread of Love

Our Old Testament scripture this morning is from the book of Ezekiel. This book is not one we frequently hear from on Sunday mornings, so I'd like to provide just a bit of context so you can appreciate the beauty of Ezekiel's words.

Ezekiel was a priest and prophet among the elite of Judah that were the first exiles to Babylon in the late 6th century BCE. A focus of Ezekiel is why the Hebrew people ended up exiled from their homeland. He speaks out with oracles or prophecies of judgement against the Hebrew people for failing to uphold boundaries between the sacred and the profane. Ezekiel also prophesies judgement against the rulers of other nations. While the actions and sins of these various people are different, the speeches share one element – the lack of appreciation and regard for the sovereign Lord God, who rules over all. In his oracles, Ezekiel often uses images of nature to depict the glory and majesty of God. Our passage this morning comes in a prophecy against Egypt, who saw itself as a major political power. Ezekiel calls out Egypt, saying they don't compare to the greatness of what has been created by our sovereign God, the majestic cedar tree of Lebanon. Hear now these words from Ezekiel chapter 31:

In the eleventh year, on the first day of the third month, the LORD's word came to me: Human one, say to Pharaoh, Egypt's king, and his troops:

With whom do you compare in your greatness?

Consider Assyria, a cedar of Lebanon:

beautiful branches, dense shade, towering height;

indeed, its top went up between the clouds.

Waters nourished it; the deep raised it up,

because its streams flowed around the place where it was planted.

From there, water trickled down to all the other trees of the field.

And so it became higher than all the trees of the field.

Its branches became abundant; its boughs grew long.

Because of the plentiful water, it grew freely.

All the birds in the sky made nests in its branches;

all the beasts of the field gave birth under its boughs,

and in its shade, every great nation lived.

It became beautiful in its greatness and in its lush foliage,

because it took root in plentiful water.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Throughout scripture imagery of trees abound. Before we consider some images in *our Visio Divina*, I want to share some reflections and snippets of poetry from four individuals in our congregation that highlight why trees are such a profound image in our scriptures. In addition

to the vivid descriptions of the diversity and utility of trees, Ewen Todd also shared that trees abound with metaphorical significance. We see this from the very beginning of scripture, with the texts from Genesis on the Tree of Life. I appreciate Ewen's reminder about the tree being "a future promise linked to love, calm, healing, and to eternal life, but also to judgment."

By their very structure, trees symbolize the depth and breadth of our beings. They symbolize our connectedness to God. And they represent our connectedness to others, past, present and future. In the tree collage video I'll share, you will see a photo from Jeff Arbour of a silver maple tree planted in honor of his mother when she died. Gazing on this tree stirs fond memories of her for Jeff. Eunice Creswell crystalizes this image of our shared connectivity and unity in a portion of her poem *Trees*:

You freely give
shelter, food,
and welcome.
I live but a fraction
of your time.
You are there
when I am born
and may be there
long after I am gone.
You are connected
to the unseen mycelium
and will continue
to give long after
you are gone.

We too are connected,
by the One who
made us both.

The prophet Ezekiel recognized that trees symbolize those things which anchors us, as well as our aspirations. "With whom do you compare in your greatness? Consider Assyria, a cedar of Lebanon: beautiful branches, dense shade, towering height; indeed, its top went up between the clouds."

Ron Dorr, captures this essence beautifully in his poem "Swinging."

I push her gently to the north,
She's four and I am forty-three,
Her feet swing out,
She holds on tight for fear—
for fear of what?
But then she feels the wind
Come from the tree nearby
And asks,
"If you push me higher,

Will I touch the leaves?"
"Yes, yes," I say,
She pumps the swing,
And I just pat her back,
"If you push me higher,
Will I touch the sky?"
I think a bit. "Yes," I reply,
Her legs and mind take flight,
"If you push me higher,
Will I touch the heart of God?"
"Yes yes, you will."

Is it any wonder that trees have become metaphors of our faith journey? Jesus recognized this in the parable of the mustard seed that Barbara read. It's the smallest of all seeds. But when it's grown, it's the largest of all vegetable plants and the birds in the sky come and nest in its branches. Cathy McCarty shared a photo of tree filled red cherries, noting its beauty and productivity. The contrast of the red and green is captivating. Jayne Zuhlke, in a poem she wrote inspired by our prompt this morning, shares:

God made trees for us to see, how beautiful
Our lives should be.
Their colors...spring green and golden fall,
But trees mean more than that to me,
They provide us shade and peace and serenity.
Trees show us in unseen ways, to grow, have faith,
To remain strong and tall.
So that when the storms of life come, we have our faith
And do not fall.

Two weeks ago, with the Conversation and Contemplation group, I had the chance to embrace the mindfulness practice known as Forest Bathing. Through a guided walk, we were intentional in dwelling in the sounds, sights, smells, touch, and even taste of the forest. Of appreciating the gifts of the trees and plants and water around us. To seek out the divine. The anchoring and aspiration. The depth and breadth. The history and the freshness. The dying back and the regeneration. This is the story of our faith. This is our theology. In the video collage I will share tomorrow, you can see this embodied theology in the tree photos submitted by Jack Harkema – a trinity tree – and the God tree submitted by Jill Schaberg.

I now invite you to center yourself. Take a deep breath in – breathe in God's love. Exhale a God's love out to others. On the screen I will share three images – each one for two minutes. As images appear on the screen, you are invited to be captivated by beauty. Who or what has rooted your faith? What gives your trunk sustenance? What nutrients do you need to seek more? Where is God calling you to stretch your branches?