

“Only God Can Make a Tree”

A Sermon Preached by the
 Rev. Jean Niven Lenk
 Sunday, August 8, 2010
 First Congregational Church of Stoughton, United Church of Christ

Texts: Genesis 2:4b-9; Revelation 22:1-2

“I think that I shall never see a poem as lovely as a tree.”

So begins Joyce Kilmer’s famous poem “Trees.” And trees are what I want to talk about as I continue my sermon series on creation care. Trees are a most appropriate topic for this morning, as we worship here in our outdoor chapel under the shade of these beautiful pines and maples.

Last Sunday, I shared with you how the Bible has been used – I would say *misused* -- to validate humankind’s attitude of complacency about caring for the earth; in extreme cases, scripture has been misused to condone downright exploitation of the earth. But when read faithfully, the bible is a powerful ecological handbook on how to live rightly on earth, and made in God’s image, we are called to be wise stewards and loving caretakers of God’s magnificent creation.

And the bible is full of ... trees. In fact, more than 30 kinds are named in scripture. Noah used gopher wood to build the ark. Abraham and Sarah entertained angels unaware under oak trees. Elijah escaped into the wilderness and rested under a broom tree. It was under a palm tree that Deborah, prophet and judge, dispensed justice. The ark of the covenant was made from an acacia tree. Solomon’s temple was built using cedars of Lebanon. That wee little man Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore tree so he could glimpse Jesus passing by.

In the bible, trees symbolize strength, power, glory, wealth, honor, and restoration. The dove brings Noah an olive branch as a sign that the flood has receded and dry land has re-appeared. The psalmist uses a tree as a metaphor for a life well lived. God’s providence is shown through trees, which provide shelter for animals, nesting places for the birds, and fruit as sustenance for humans. God’s judgment is depicted in the cutting down of a tree. Beginning in Genesis, a relationship is created that will continue through the pages of history: God, trees, and humans. And the bible’s story of salvation begins and ends with a tree.

In our scripture lesson from Genesis this morning, we read how God creates man, and then immediately makes all kinds of trees to grow out of the ground, including the Tree of Life. Now, my feminist inclinations would cause me to chafe at the revelation that God made trees before making woman, if it were not for the symbolism of trees – they are a metaphor for God.

And trees are often used to depict God. Years ago, I received this lovely picture of a tree from the funeral home that handled my husband’s services as a way of assuring me that just as Darcy was now with God, God was also with me.

This past Thursday, I attended a ceremony for eight student chaplains finishing up their Clinical Pastoral Education unit at Hebrew Senior Life in Roslindale; Lizzie Maris, our student pastor this past year, was one of the graduates, and by the way, she says “hi” to everyone. The graduation was held in a synagogue, and on the front of the ark where the sacred torah scrolls are kept was an exquisite three-dimensional sculpture of a tree, conveying that God’s story lay within. Many bibles depict a tree on the front page to say the same thing.

And the most important event in the bible for Christians is framed by trees. Jesus spent the years before his Galilean ministry as a carpenter working with wood. He describes the kingdom of heaven a mustard seed that grows into a tree where birds can nest. He is the true vine and describes his followers as fruit-bearing orchards. Palm leaves are spread before him. And he stretches out his strong, calloused carpenter’s hands and dies on a tree.

Yes, trees are important to God. And they are essential to our existence here on earth. Trees are vital to a healthy environment, absorbing carbon dioxide from the air and giving off oxygen for us to breathe. The roots of trees check erosion, and the fruit of trees serve as food. When the leaves and fruit fall to the ground, everything decomposes into more nutrients that keep the cycle going.

Many animals eat the leaves and fruit of trees for nourishment. Hundreds of living creatures call trees their home. Leaf-covered branches keep many animals, such as birds and squirrels, out of the reach of predators. Studies show that trees reduce frustration levels, relieve stress, lessen mental fatigue, and decrease anger.¹ Trees sustain and protect our very lives. But what has happened to trees in our world?

Due to disease, there are no longer chestnut trees on Chestnut Street or elms on Elm Street here in America.² Since the early 1970s, Seattle has lost more than half of its tree canopy as more businesses and people have moved into the city and smaller homes have given way to megahouses.³ But it’s not just America’s problem. In Africa, new roads, agricultural projects, logging, and mining are claiming an ever-greater area of once-pristine Amazonian forest. Afghanistan’s trees are disappearing at an alarming rate after decades of war and poverty.⁴

I googled the phrase “where have all the trees gone” and got over 8,500 results from all over the world; from Long Island to Louisiana to Scotland to Athens to Brazil to Costa Rica to Kenya to Mumbai, people are lamenting the loss of their trees.

But there are things that we can do. Here are some ways that we can save trees:
Reuse and recycle. Before throwing away any paper product, take a moment to consider whether it may have another use left in it. For instance, used envelopes can be used for shopping lists or making notes.

¹ <http://unisoulmedia.com/unisoularticle01.pdf>

² This sermon is inspired by J. Matthew Sleeth, “Introduction: The Power of a Greed God,” *The Green Bible* (New York, New York: HarperCollins, 2008), pp. I17-I22.

³ http://citycomfortsblog.typepad.com/cities/2007/06/where_have_all_.html

⁴ http://teacher.scholastic.com/scholasticnews/indepth/junior/news_briefs/index.asp?article=041408

Buy paper products that are made from recycled paper to ensure that trees weren't cut down so you could have a roll of paper towel.

Consume fewer paper products. If you use paper bags, be sure to re-use them until you have worn them out. Better – use and reuse plastic bags, or get reusable carry totes for grocery shopping and put lunch sandwiches into reusable containers.

Use cloth towels rather than paper towels for cleaning up.

Use cloth napkins rather than paper napkins.

Recycle your magazines. If you can borrow magazines from your officemates or classmates, opt not to buy at all.

Cut down on junk mail. Behind every catalog and direct marketing offer, there are destroyed trees. Do what you can to stop junk mail. Direct-mail marketing uses up an estimated 100 million trees a year and almost half of the direct-mail marketing ends up unopened in landfills.

Plant a tree! The best way to save trees is to plant more of them. It is also an act of worship. When asked what he'd do if he knew God were coming back tomorrow, theologian and Reformer Martin Luther responded that he'd plant a tree. He said:

In the true nature of things, if we rightly consider, every green tree is far more glorious than if it were made of gold and silver. . . . God writes the gospel, not in the Bible alone, but also on trees...

Luther understood that tending God's good earth was itself a high act of spiritual worship, an act of faith that honored God.⁵

Trees are important to God and God's story, and creation care is at the very core of our Christian walk. As people of faith, may we carry out the biblical call to be good stewards, taking care of trees and all of God's creation, as an act of worship, praising and honoring the One who created us all.

*I think that I shall never see
a poem as lovely as a tree.
A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
against the sweet earth's flowing breast;
A tree that looks at God all day,
and lifts her leafy arms to pray;
A tree that may in summer wear
a nest of robins in her hair;
Upon whose bosom snow has lain,
who intimately lives with rain.
Poems are made by fools like me,
but only God can make a tree.*

Amen.

⁵ Gordon Aeschliman, "Loving the Earth Is Loving the Poor," *The Green Bible*, p. I-97.