

2021 11 28 – Lessons from the Trees

Luke 21:25-36 (The Inclusive Bible)

Signs will appear in the sun, the moon and the stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish, distraught at roaring of the sea and the waves. People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the earth. After that, people will see the Chosen one coming on a cloud with great power and glory.

Wow, that's quite the prediction! The truth is, many scholars have argued that Jesus never said those words. Instead, it was probably the author of the Gospel of Luke who was trying to make sense of the apocalyptic world in which he lived. A world where Jesus had been crucified on the cross about 55 years before. A world where the city of Jerusalem (including the Jewish temple) had been destroyed by war. A world where ordinary people were so focussed on making a living and enjoying life that no one seemed to be paying attention to what was happening around them. <https://www.westarinstitute.org/projects/the-jesus-seminar/jesus-seminar-phase-1-sayings-of-jesus/>

If you think about it, we live in that apocalyptic world right now. The signs are everywhere:

- atmospheric rivers causing disastrous floods in British Columbia, Newfoundland and Cape Breton,
- the new omnicron variant of COVID-19 appearing out of South Africa and spreading around the world,

- rising inflation causing unrest in the markets, and
- refugees trying to escape a Taliban-run Afghanistan.

We live in a world where anxiety, uncertainty, fear and even paranoia are rampant. A world where it's too easy for those of us living in the relative safety of Swift Current, SK to go about our daily lives, preparing for Christmas, getting our booster shots, and acting as if nothing is happening around us.

But the message of today's reading is to "stand up straight," to "look," and to "see." In particular, Jesus shares a brief parable where he says,

Look at the fig tree, or any other tree. You will see when they're budding and know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see all these things happening, know that the reign of God is near.

In the midst of apocalyptic times, these are words of hope, words of promise, words of new life. This is one part of the passage that Jesus might have actually said at some point in his ministry. Jesus often used examples from nature to describe God's reign of peace and justice on earth. It is true that our natural environment has much to teach us about ourselves, our neighbours and how we are to live with respect in creation.

Today, I am going to invite us to look even closer at the trees and to find out what we can learn from this important part of God's creation. To do that I want to share with you an excerpt from a fascinating book called "The Hidden Life of Trees." The author, Peter Wohlleben, is a forest manager in Germany and has

spent many years observing trees and how they interact. One of the trees . has worked with closely is the beech. He writes:

I've already mentioned that beeches are capable of friendship and go so far as to feed each other. It is obviously not in a forest's best interest to lose its weaker members. If that were to happen, it would leave gaps that would disrupt the forest's sensitive microclimate with its dim light and high humidity. If it weren't for the gap issue, every tree could develop freely and lead its own life. I say "could" because beeches, at least, seem to set a great deal of store by sharing resources.

Students at the Institute for Environmental Research at RWTH Aachen discovered something amazing about photosynthesis in undisturbed beech forests. Apparently, the trees synchronize their performance so that they are all equally successful. And that is not what one would expect. Each beech tree grows in a unique location, and conditions can vary greatly in just a few yards. The soil can be stony or loose. It can retain a great deal of water or almost no water. It can be full of nutrients or extremely barren. Accordingly, each tree experiences different growing conditions; therefore, each tree grows more quickly or more slowly and produces more or less sugar or wood, and thus you would expect every tree to be photosynthesizing at a different rate.

And that's what makes the research results so astounding. The rate of photosynthesis is the same for all the trees. The trees, it seems, are equalizing differences between the strong and the weak. Whether they are

thick or thin, all members of the same species are using light to produce the same amount of sugar per leaf. This equalization is taking place underground through the roots. There's obviously a lively exchange going on down there. Whoever has an abundance of sugar hands some over; whoever is running short gets help. Once again, fungi are involved. Their enormous networks act as gigantic redistribution mechanisms. It's a bit like the way social security systems operate to ensure individual members of society don't fall too far behind.

Wohlleben, Peter. *The Hidden Life of Trees: 1 (The Mysteries of Nature)* (pp. 15-16). Greystone Books. Kindle Edition.

So, if look and see, if we listen to the lessons from the trees, then Peter Wohlleben is telling us that life in the wild isn't always about the survival of the fittest. What if we actually lived our lives like the Beech trees in a forest live theirs? What if we truly took care of those in need, those who have fallen on hard times, and those who are not able to care for themselves? What if we realized, like the trees in the forest, that taking care of each other results in a better world for all of us?

Even in the apocalyptic times in which we are living, we can see buds on the trees, and signs of hope around us:

- the wonderful stories of the support that was provided for the people who were trapped in Hope, BC during the flood,
- the amazing outpouring of care for our front-line workers at the beginning of this pandemic, and

- the tent city created in Regina to house those who had lost their homes due to decreased income support and increasing costs.

It is possible for us to help build God's reign on earth when we focus on the needs of those around us, when we work to ensure that everyone has what they need to survive and to thrive.

Yes Christ is coming, but not "on a cloud of great power and glory." Christ, the Spirit of Love, exists in each one of us and is coming through us. In this season of Advent, as we await the celebration of Jesus' birth, as we await the coming of the reign of God, let us remember the lesson of the trees and work for peace and justice for all.

Today, as we celebrate at the communion table, let us give thanks for the Holy Mystery, the Christ, the Spirit of Love, that supports us when we are hurting and energizes us when we look and see the needs of others.

May it be so. Amen.