

WGUMC November 30, 2014 Advent 1
"Tree Therapy" Mark 13:28-37

We went to visit my sister and her family in Tahoe for Thanksgiving. Sue has lived there for almost 30 years, and Tahoe seems like a second home to me. But things looked different this year. It was almost 60 on Thursday. We saw snow, but only a dusting of it at the very top of the highest peaks. What's more: there's stagnant water in the Truckee River. The lake level has fallen below the rim, and so only a very little water is seeping down from the lake. If you doubt the climate is changing, I simply say "get you up to a high mountain." [Isaiah 40:9] Up there in the higher elevations, the signs are everywhere.

In the Sierras, glaciers are melting and the snow pack is shrinking. That means reduced spring runoff, a longer fire season and bigger fires. And though we see the signs, we don't yet see the solutions.

As slow as we have been to see changes in Mother Nature, we have been even slower to see them in human nature. The signs are there, but we choose to ignore them. On a personal level, we don't want to think about how the environment in this valley is changing us: the compromises we are making or the price we are paying. If you're working here, you know that business in the valley can be brutal. Just trying to survive is stressful. And the more we get caught up in our work, the less likely we are to stop and think, "Is this working?"

If someone were to ask us, "How goes it with your soul?" what would we say? If someone were to inquire, "How long have you lived with a stress level that could kill you?" how would we respond? To be honest, I don't think we know why are we willing to put up with the side effects of this unhealthy lifestyle, instead of doing the things that we know will make us feel better and live longer.

We are like climate change deniers: good at seeing the signs of the coming danger and explaining them away. Here's an example: One of the chronic health problems among working people in Silicon Valley is not getting enough sleep. Because we are wired into work all the time, we are becoming the sleep deprivation generation. And I am guilty as charged. But of all people, I should know that not getting enough sleep is like not getting enough Spirit: both are life-threatening conditions.

I do see the signs in others and in me, and frankly it's scary. That's why I am so insistent about getting out of the valley and up into the hills and spending time with trees. I didn't know that the Japanese have a word for what I do. They call it *shinrin yoku*, or "forest bathing." Spending time with trees was first promoted by the Forest Agency of Japan in 1982 as a way to reduce chronic stress in the workplace. Mindfully walking in the forest has been shown to reduce the level of the stress hormone cortisol by 16% and to increase

the activity level of cancer-fighting white blood cells by 40%. That's because trees emit chemicals called phytoncides, and regular exposure to them is very beneficial to our health. Think of it as Mother Nature's aromatherapy.

So, we now know that trees have a positive impact on our physical health, but they do the same for our spiritual health, too. Trees make good doctors and good teachers, and many of their spiritual lessons can be found in our Bible.

For instance, in our reading today, Jesus is talking about the coming of the Son of Man with great power and glory.

[Mark 13:26] "About that day or hour no one knows" [13:32] but there will be signs in heaven and signs on earth that the time is near. And all we have to do is learn to recognize them, and we can do that by looking at the trees. Jesus says, when the fig tree's tender branches put forth leaves, you know that summer is near. [13:28] That means that if you don't want to miss the signs telling you where God is and what God is doing

in your life. what God is doing in your life, pay attention to trees.

One of the great blessings of this church campus is the abundance of trees that are growing here. We have a little forest in the midst of a big city, and it's a great place to see signs of God at work in us. So for the first week in Advent, I'm offering you a guided meditation that you can use over at Woodhaven or any other forest that you like to bathe in. I invite you to use this guide anytime during the season of Advent to learn some lessons from the trees.

Lesson One. In Genesis One, God creates humankind and then God says, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food." [Gen 1:29] In the beginning, we had plants and trees and that was enough. And that's a message we don't hear nearly often enough.

In Silicon Valley, most of us have everything we really need. And the only thing that keeps us from being aware of that is what you might call cultivated greed. You see, our economy depends upon our anxiety and it has trained us well to keep buying more than we need. If we would rather feel the peace that comes with knowing that we have enough, that we are enough, then we need to spend less time shopping and more time with trees.

Lesson Two. A little later in Genesis, the Lord appears to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sits at the entrance to his tent during the heat of the day. Three men, representing the Lord, arrive and Abraham rushes up to greet them. He bows down and says to them, "Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree." [Gen 18:4]

Abraham is just doing what any good host would have done in his day. But today, we are hardly on the lookout for

messengers from God coming in the heat of the day, are we? Instead, we leave in the morning with our work blinders on. And throughout the day, we try to block out all distractions, including those occasional godly interruptions. We seldom have time to entertain angels and invite them to rest a while under the oaks of Mamre. But I wonder: what would happen if we scheduled a lunch date with a tree?

The Santa Clara Water District has an outdoor patio on the back of the building by the percolation ponds. It's just a stone's throw from Almaden Expressway, but it's a wonderful little getaway. There are trees and tables there. There's also a labyrinth. Along the paths of this labyrinth, there are etchings of native plants and animals and quotes about the environment. And in the center, a stone with words from *The Lorax*, you know, the one who speaks for the trees. Now here's a company that lets you make a lunch date with a tree, and I bet that the Water District has some happy employees.

Lesson Three. In the Bible, trees are symbols of life and perseverance. Jeremiah says that people who trust in God are like trees planted by streams of living water. They do not fear the heat of the day; their leaves stay green. They are not anxious about the drought because their roots go deep. Even in hard times, they do not cease to bear fruit. [Jer 17:7-8]

The trees in this valley grow by streams. They don't grow where they can't get water. So why do we human beings, who are a lot smarter than trees, consent to live so much of our lives far from the waters that restore our souls? Why do we spend so much time in spiritual deserts without bringing enough water with us to sustain us? We certainly don't need a drought to remind us how dry we can be living in this valley. The only way to survive here is to trust in God by anchoring ourselves with deep roots that tap into the subterranean streams of God's grace. We will not only survive the drought but we will bear fruit for others here who are dying of thirst.

Finally, Lesson Four. Those who trust in God are also like the trees in Ezekiel's vision that border the river of life flowing down from the sanctuary of God. The trees grow on both banks of the river and produce all kinds of fruit. They don't just bear fruit in one season, but every month of the year. The fruit of these trees are for food and the leaves are for the healing of the nations. [Ezekiel 47:12 and Rev 22:2]

This vision of the trees in heaven reminds me of the importance of trees on earth. Here, every tree sequesters carbon. The leaves take CO₂ out of the atmosphere and release oxygen into the atmosphere. In this way, the leaves of trees literally do heal the nations. And I got to thinking that those who trust God can do the same. Christians can take the fear and hate, along with the violence and greed, out of our atmosphere and turn these toxic chemicals into love and peace, joy and justice. And if more of us were breathing this purified

air, if more of us were living in an atmosphere of love, peace, joy and justice, then by definition, our God would be very near.

On this first Sunday of Advent, this season of waiting for God, let's remember what Jesus said. If we look to the trees and learn their lessons, we will see and know that God is near. And if we pause a while at Woodhaven or anyplace else where we let the trees speak to our souls, we just might find that the One we are waiting for is already here.