

WGUMC July 14, 2019 “Tree Therapy”  
Jeremiah 8:22 and Ezekiel 47:6, 12

In the last days before the city of Jerusalem fell to the invading Babylonians, the people were suffering and Jeremiah laments, “Is there no balm in Gilead, is there no physician there?” From that question comes the old African American spiritual, and every time we sing it, I wonder where was this balm and what was it? No one really knows. Likely, it was some kind of resin from some kind of tree.

As you know, trees have long been used medicinally. Native peoples in California used parts of juniper, piñon pine and coast live oak trees to cure everything from splinters to fevers. They knew what Ezekiel knew, that the leaves of many trees are for healing.

That is a lesson I have been relearning ever since May 2015 when I was diagnosed with Stage 1 breast cancer. Though my mother and younger sister have both had breast cancer and, thankfully, are alive today, nevertheless, I spent

three days in the tomb, between the call back after the mammogram and the subsequent biopsy, coming to terms with the possibility that I was going to die sooner rather than later.

But three days in the tomb was long enough for Jesus and long enough for me to dwell on my mortality. As soon as the diagnosis was confirmed, I experienced an incredible sense of peace, the kind of peace that passes all understanding and from that moment on, I was determined to wrest all the grace I could from the cancer.

My biggest concern about chemotherapy was the prospect of not being able to keep up my regular routine of running trails. It's spiritually and psychologically necessary for this Montana girl to get out of the city and into wild spaces. Without knowing it, ever since moving to the Bay Area years ago, I have been practicing what the Japanese call *shinrin yoku*, or "forest bathing." Japan's Forest Agency first coined the term in 1982 and developed forest therapy trails designed to

reduce chronic workplace stress, a program sorely needed in Silicon Valley.

Though I had been banking on it for years, I got my first scientific evidence of the physical benefits of spending time in the forest while preparing for a sermon on the lesson of the fig tree in 2014. Trying to make the point that trees make good teachers, I discovered that they also make good doctors. Aside from their traditional medicinal properties, trees and other plants emit phytoncides which are nature's antimicrobials, and Japanese researchers have shown that when you breathe in air laden with these chemicals, they lower the level of the stress hormone cortisol and boost the activity of cancer-fighting immune cells, effects that can last for days.

So five months before knowing that I had cancer, I ended up writing a sermon on what Biblical trees can teach us about health—both physical and spiritual—and prophetically titled the sermon, "Tree Therapy."

When I was told that my cancer was HER2-positive and that the treatment was going to be aggressive, it all came back to me. I realized that I was going to need to combine the chemotherapy with a serious course in tree therapy. So I bought a parks pass and made the commitment to get to Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park in Felton as often as I could in the months to come.

I also began to journal again, because my previous health challenges had taught me not to take this opportunity for spiritual growth for granted. And I figured that one way that I could continue to do meaningful ministry during the chemotherapy was to witness to others about the ways that God was at work in me while on this journey.

That's how I started communing with trees and posting my reflections on Facebook. The following is a sort of summary. A couple of weeks before chemo began, I had one of those mystical moments that make you feel happier (more

blessed) than you ought to be. As I walked through the forest of young and old, living and dead trees, I saw everything around me, including me, as participants in the great and good cycle of life and death, and I wrote: "Let the trees teach me: My body is a redwood forest and even if it feels like I'm dying, I still belong in the dance of the living and there is no part of it that is not amazing."

The following week, I read that President Obama was expanding two marine sanctuaries in Northern California. And I gave thanks that Henry Cowell is a tree sanctuary, a grove of old growth redwoods protected from logging, and I prayed that God would, as the prayer song goes, declare me a sanctuary as well. Like the trees, I was going to need protection from sharp tools and the encroachment of environmental toxins.

After the lumpectomy, I had a chemo port put in, and I began counting all my new scars and noticing how the oldest and most beautiful redwood trees all have them. I discovered

the truth that my scars are my life and wrote: "no significant growth has ever happened in me that wasn't spurred on by some visible or invisible wound...."

Once the chemo began, I found myself studying the forest even when I wasn't there and uncovered many more connections between the trees and me. Impressed that the bark of a redwood can be up to a foot thick to deter insects and fire, I prayed that my stomach lining would be more like tree bark "so my gut wouldn't hurt so much."

Trying to train myself to think of chemo not as a poison but as an agent of healing, I remembered that one of the drugs I was taking actually comes from another evergreen, the European Yew. Because it is poisonous to humans, it is a potent symbol of death. But because it is so long-lived (400-600 years), it is often planted in cemeteries as a symbol of eternal life. I wrote, "In short, it is a chemo tree, full of poison

and promise...and, by the grace of God, I will try to focus less on the poison, more on the promise."

By the second treatment, my hair was starting to fall out. I saved a bunch of that hair and the following week buried it in an old burned-out log in the forest. I wasn't sure why I did it, except that I somehow needed to ritualize it. The thought that my hair might be toxic bothered me. I didn't want to poison the forest, but then I remembered all the human waste that forests absorb in the form of CO<sub>2</sub>. I wrote, "Redwoods sequester more carbon than any other tree on earth. And there is seven times more biomass in an old-growth redwood forest than in a tropical rainforest. Perhaps a redwood grove that already absorbs so many of our sins could absorb these toxins, too." Burying my chemo hair in a redwood log "reminded me that I can bury all that is toxic to me right in the heart of God. God's heart is so big...that it can absorb all my hurts and failures, all my sorrows and fears. God's heart has no biomass, but it is so

massively alive that it can swallow up all my disease and death."

I kept jogging, slower and slower, but I was glad I could still outrun the trees. I thought about how redwoods are rooted and wondered how 300-foot trees can stand up without any taproot at all. Their shallow roots grow laterally, I learned, and intertwine with the roots of other trees nearby to form a strong root system to protect the whole grove from windthrow. For the same reasons, redwoods in the wild don't grow alone and neither do people, a truth I was living every day.

I was glad to say: "My 'grove' is my family and my faith community." In between visits from my sisters and my mother, I was upheld by a strong web of love and hugs and prayers and offers of help from those of you here who are rooted with me in faith. So even though I have sometimes felt as if the cancer treatments were about to blow me over, I always knew that I



would keep standing because I am firmly anchored in this grove we call the family of God.

You can see how day by day, my tree therapy was healing me and not just physically. It wasn't just the phytoncides that were working on me. Redwood trees have ministered the balm in Gilead to me, the medicine that my soul needs prescribed by the Physician who created me. The Bible uses a tree as the symbol for life, and in the last four years, redwood trees have become for me trees of life with healing in their leaves just like the ones in Ezekiel's vision of heaven. Praise God that I didn't have to die to see them!

Here's a curious fact: Redwoods have six pairs of chromosomes, compared to our two, and the higher chance of gene mutations has helped redwoods adapt and survive for 65 million years. When I read that, I realized that the very mutations that drive the process of evolution not only make our life possible, they also make cancer inevitable. This

redwood, this tall tree of long life, helped me put everything in perspective: "Cancer is the cost of our being here, and in the end, I believe it is worth it."

Now it's been four years. So far, I'm cancer-free. What the drugs have beaten down, the trees have helped to build back up. If I were a tree, you could count my growth rings. And as I said then, I say now: "I am grateful that God (and my church!) has given me the time and opportunity to be with the trees, because by God's grace, they have enabled me to be free of fear and anxiety and to feel full of life and faith despite my diagnosis. And I do pray that my reflections have planted a few seeds in others. If my 'tree therapy' encourages even one person to seek their own healing in the forest or gives hope and strength to one person who is struggling through a challenging season, then I give God all thanks and praise."