

“Branches of Hope” Jeremiah 33:12-16

A couple of years ago, the *Smithsonian Magazine* published an article with the interesting title, “Do Trees Talk to Each Other?”

The title intrigued me

because even though I am familiar with Tolkien’s Forest of Fangorn which is home to the huge walking, talking tree-beings known as the Ents . . .

and even though one of the great books of all time is *The Giving Tree*, whose gracious and generous conversations with the boy impart life lessons for people of all ages . . .

and while I am aware of Greek mythology in which all the trees in the grove beside the sanctuary of Zeus became endowed with the gift of prophecy so that the oaks could speak and deliver oracles,

I never really considered that trees actually communicate.

In fact, I was always taught that trees existed as striving, disconnected loners,

competing with each other for water and nutrients and sunlight,

with the winners shading out the losers and draining them dry.

But according to the article, and German forester Peter Wohlleben and Suzanne Simard, a professor of forest ecology in Canada,

trees have evolved to live in cooperative, interdependent relationships . . .

and rather than *competing* for water and nutrients, trees *share* them,

so that for the young saplings in a deeply shaded forest that lack access to the sunlight to photosynthesize,

the branches of the network literally provide a lifeline.

As evidence, Wohlleben once came across a gigantic beech stump in a forest, four or five feet across, which was cut down 400 or 500 years ago,

but as he scraped away the surface with his penknife, he found something astonishing — the stump was still green with chlorophyll.

And for Wohlleben, there was only one explanation —

the surrounding beeches were keeping it alive by pumping nutrients to it through their network.

The branches of the surrounding beech trees were receiving the sunlight

and then through the root system sending the nutrients to the distressed tree.¹

And perhaps as we begin this season of Advent, we can take a lesson from the branches and from the Bible . . .

because in the Bible, Jeremiah spoke of a branch, a Righteous Branch,

a Righteous Branch that would receive the life-giving light as a new dawn breaks upon the horizon,

and then infuse the land with the nutrients of justice and righteousness.

And for Jeremiah, that was a word of hope that the people needed.

After all, the situation for Jeremiah and Jerusalem could not have been much worse.

Jeremiah had been placed under arrest (32:2) for delivering a word from the LORD that the

¹ See the online article by Richard Grant, “Do Trees Talk to Each Other?” *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 2018, at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-whispering-trees-180968084/>

people in power didn't want to hear,
and so the political pundits and the administrative cabinet dubbed it to be "fake news,"
probably causing Jeremiah to be labeled as "an enemy of the people."
In addition, God's own chosen ones had also broken the covenant,
and, as a result, unjust judicial decisions had been made . . .
innocent people had been murdered . . .
leaders and business people were acting out of evil and impure motives . . .
most of the population disregarded any needs but their own . . .
and much of the land was oppressed.

The forest of faithfulness that God had planted had been corrupted by the rotten roots of unrighteousness.

The timbers of truth had withered beneath the acidic soil of sin and selfishness.

Harvests of hope had been polluted by the chemical compounds of compromise and corruption.

It was no wonder, then, that Jeremiah described Jerusalem as a place of waste and desolation . . .

a place without humankind . . .

a place without inhabitants . . .

a place even without beasts . . .

a place that was abandoned, bereft, and void of life . . .

a place reduced to paralyzing hopelessness.²

Now I imagine that, when most of us hear and interpret these verses,

we probably flinch at the awful sense that they somehow describe something hauntingly accurate about the world we know.

I mean, we frequently hear the disapproval and criticism levied against the judicial courts that only sometimes yield justice,

against schools which only occasionally educate children,

against a medical system which occasionally provides sporadic access to care,

and against churches which are often only worried about their own survival.

Because of our distrust of the people who are unlike us,

we are far too easily talked out of our true identity as God's people,

accepting the traits and trademarks that are carved into the bark of our lives by the world's humanity-destroying system,

until we forget who we have been called to be . . .

and so, discrimination is emboldened . . .

labels are applied . . .

people are demonized . . .

revenge and retaliation are coveted . . .

until our fear and our lack of faith erode a harvest of hope into a desert of

² See the comments offered by Walter Brueggemann, *To Build, To Plant: Jeremiah 26 – 52*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), page 96.

desolation.

“But there is One who is coming,” says Jeremiah,
“for God’s Righteous Branch shall spring forth in midst of our barrenness,
and He shall infuse the nutrients of justice and righteousness into all the land.”

During Advent, this is the One for whom we wait –
the Righteous Branch that sows the seeds of hope along our daily paths,
so that God will work through us,
not just to articulate new visions,
but to build new communities of equality
and to discover how our lives can make a difference in the world.

During Advent, this is the One for whom we wait –
the Righteous Branch that provides so generously for all people, even those who are straining
for sunlight in the shade,
that we are inspired to open our arms to all humankind –
the foreigner, the stranger, all who seek a better life –
and we gather together as one,
as the roots of righteousness crack the concrete
of all the religious walls,
all the ethnic walls,
all the cultural walls,
and all the walls of prejudice and racism that separate us from each other.

At Advent, God’s Righteous Branch nourishes the forest of humanity with the dreams for a new
reality,
so that the stem of knowledge and wisdom sprouts through the suffocating dust of inequality and
signals a new beginning for all creation,
where the strong branches of freedom will never be cut by the axe of oppression or
enslavement,
and where, amid the stench of exclusion, the fragrant petals of hope bloom to fill the air
with the aroma of dignity and respect for all humanity . . .
and all the people of the earth will find a home in its branches.

At Advent, we dare to walk along the troublesome trails of humankind,
and nurtured with the light from the Sun of Righteousness,
God’s promised Branch blooms with a new reality that can grow in the soil of our despair,
where we are inspired to produce a harvest that transforms wastelands of loneliness into
landscapes of love,
bringing beauty where there was barrenness,
initiating newness where there were nightmares,
and heralding hope where there had been heartache.

At Advent, God’s Righteous Branch inspires us to sow the seeds of our gifts, however small,

however unique, like seeds upon the earth's terrain to cultivate orchards of newness,
so that, through our interconnectedness, all the forests of humankind can savor the nutritious fruit
of hope and justice,
where all people can climb the branches of imagination and creativity to discover God's
answers to the world's problems,
and where all people will be blessed through God's Righteous Branch that nourishes a
true human community in which all of us live.

At an apartment building in the inner city of Cleveland, Ohio,
a little Vietnamese girl, trying to pay respects to her deceased father,
tiptoed out the door and darted across the street in the middle of the night.
She stepped into an abandoned, overgrown, rat-infested lot, littered with abandoned appliances, old
tire treads, broken liquor bottles, and tattered trash bags . . .
and there, at a spot relatively far from the sidewalk and hidden from view by a discarded
refrigerator, she bent down . . .
and with a spoon that she had lifted from the kitchen drawer,
she dug six small holes and planted some seeds.

Six seeds in honor of her father, and she vowed that the seeds would thrive.
But, of course, every apartment building had its nosy neighbors, and that building was no different.
A Romanian woman, who had spent the last 20 years of her life typing for the Parole board,
saw the little girl running across the street to bury something in the dirt.
She considered calling the police, because she was convinced that the young girl who had
appeared and disappeared so quickly was trying to conceal some drugs or a gun or some
other illegal item.

So one night she went to the lot to dig up the contraband . . .
but when she did, she found only the seeds.
Feeling terrible about her act, she replanted the seeds and then enlisted the help of the janitor
to water the little girl's seeds and help them grow.

However, on his first trip to the lot,
he was discovered by the girl, but not wanting to frighten her,
he continued to water the seeds and then left.
But that experience had changed him . . .
and he realized that he could help in cleaning up the vacant lot and make a better
garden.

But when the janitor began to plant his garden, other eyes were on him.
The tenant from Guatemala was watching him . . .
and the next day, carrying a trowel and seeds of his own, he too cleared some trash from the
lot,

and the Guatemalan began to work his own plot of soil.
A man from Nigeria also noticed the gardens and decided that it may be the way for him to win the
heart of his old girlfriend by planting tomatoes in the lot by her apartment.
He remembered how she loved fresh tomatoes, and he cultivated his little plot with the plants.
But when he discovered that someone had been stealing his tomatoes,
he employed a homeless teenager who had been sleeping in the garden to protect his
tomatoes and the other plots in the garden.

Then the fabric store owner from India became amazed by all the colors in the garden surrounded by the dark brick of the apartment building.

So, he added to the color by planting pale purple eggplants,
which gave the other people an excuse to come talk to him to ask him about these unusual plants.

And when the Indian gentleman realized that he had never met different people from different countries until he came to the garden,

he made an astonishing observation –

the colors in the garden are not for your eyes to see, but “to make your eyes see your neighbors.”

He noticed how the garden brought the people together for more than just the garden, because through the garden, rather than being scared of the people who were different, they began to protect each other and care for each other³ . . .

and it all began through some seeds, some really small seeds, which were sown upon the ground,

and those seeds put forth the branches that extended from the soil of Cleveland to people from Vietnam and Romania and Guatemala and Nigeria and India,

so that all the people of the earth can find a place together beneath God’s Righteous Branch.

Similarly, the garden of our common humanity would barely survive in the incredibly poor soil that we have created . . .

but . . . put them together with seeds from the Righteous Branch that transforms the earth, and we can make miracles.

With the Righteous Branch that transforms the earth, God can work miracles.

And if it’s anything like the fellowship we are sharing today, those Advent miracles are certainly something I want to see.

Don’t you?

This sermon was delivered by Tom Ulrich
at the Joint Worship Service
of Westminster Presbyterian Church
and New Covenant Community Church,
Akron, Ohio,
on November 28, 2021.

³ adapted from the children’s novel by Paul Fleischman, *Seedfolks*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1997).