

SERMON: “Tree-Spotting”

First United Church, Waterloo – ADVENT I – Sunday, November 28, 2021

PRAYER: “Holy God, let your Spirit infuse us and in-form us so that we can sense and notice you at work, and recognize the signs of your activity and presence not only within ourselves, but also within and through others, within and through your church and other communities of faith, and within and through the world and all creation. Amen”

Generally speaking, it’s not a bad inclination to ask curious questions.

But sometimes, we might get a larger response or a more troubling response than we expected.

It must have been that way on the occasion when the disciples asked Jesus:

“When will all this take place? What will be the sign that it is about to take place?”

That curiosity in them just been aroused as they had passed by the Jerusalem Temple

and Jesus had said something like: “Admire its splendours now while you can,

for the time is coming when it will become a heap of ruins again.”

Then (as Mark, Matthew, and Luke all record it) in response to their “Tell us more” inquiry,

Jesus proceeded to let loose a larger list of coming disasters, unpleasantries, and cataclysms:

wars and insurrections, rumours of wars, earthquakes, famines, plagues, personal persecution,

foreign armies overthrowing Jerusalem again causing citizens to scatter to the countryside,

some will be be slaughtered, others will be taken captive.

There will also be disruptions in nature: signs among the sun, moon, and stars, roaring seas

and other disturbances on earth.

It’s our version of the nightly news all compacted into one rather terrifying mass.

In a word, Doomsday. And therefore, Jesus strongly advised,

“Stay alert, don’t be weighed down by usual cares of daily life, or escape into drink and drugs.

Stay alert, watch, and pray that you will have strength to endure and escape such troubles.”

And yet, in between rolling out that catalogues of pending portents and disasters

and offering that advice, Jesus apparently sought to soften the scatter-shock effect with a parable:

“Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves,

you know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place,

you will know that the realm of God is near.” (Luke 21:29-31, Matt. 24:32-33; Mark 13:28-29)

It might possibly happen, Jesus suggested, within a generation.

Well, we’re still waiting on that. Praise be to God! Yes?!! We don’t get to know the actual time.

“Look at the fig tree. Look at all the trees.” Sprouting leaves indicate summer’s coming.

God’s activity around and about us is likewise detectable.

Even in the midst of things falling apart, in the midst of world of systems cracking up,

in the midst of pending crises because of climate change, in the midst of an unforeseen plague,

the realm of God is yet unfolding, all things in heaven and on earth are being made new,

all things are yet evolving towards a time of wholeness of life, fullness of life,

abundant and everlasting life.

First Advent Sunday. Light the candle of hope. Hope even when it seems hard to hope.
Tree-spotting can help. Maybe you already know that.

There's a lengthy history of folklore and *Farmer's Almanac* sayings about tree-messaging.
Here are some you may have caught wind of:

Upturned maple leaves or poplar leaves are a sign of rain coming,
likewise with closed pine cones, but if they are open take in sun expect a dry spell.
Leaves that drop early portend a mild winter,
leaves that cling to their trees later into autumn foreshadow a severe winter.
Onion skins very thin, mild winter coming in.
Onion skins thick and tough, coming winter cold and rough. Same for apple skins.
An unusually thick shell on a hickory nut or walnut promises an unusually cold winter.
Ground that is covered by acorns in the fall will be covered by snow throughout winter.
Not all of these are accurate or reliable
For instance, depending on the kind of tree, fall leaves drop at variable times.
Thick shells on hickory nuts or walnuts may be more related to protection against predators.
Oak trees and beech trees tend to wait three years before producing acorns or nuts aplenty.
But, if there's a dry summer interrupting that cycle,
they will manage to produce a surplus of acorns or nuts the following year.
However we regard such signs, weather predictions are only one of multiple advisories.

Cultivated, commercially grown, front and backyard trees and house plants
do not grow or function the same way as trees and plants in a natural forest.

But, they can transmit messages in their own way.

Meet "Figgy". He's been a presence in our household for over fifteen years now.
Since we moved into a new house a couple of years ago, he's been much happier.
He's still fairly young as fig trees go and we don't intend to transplant him outdoors.
He's never borne fruit, but that's okay with us even though we do enjoy fresh figs.
Before we moved however, he was increasingly unhappy and unwell at home.
It seems that had to do with several factors:

He was not placed in close proximity to other house plants.

He was most often situated where he received only filtered or indirect light.

And, what seemed to make the most difference,
the former residence had a different heating system:
hot water radiators instead of forced air gas.

He held on in the former residence, but never really flourished.

His leaves would dry out and drop and he'd become spindly;
or they would become diseased with black spots and catch sticky brown drops of residue.

None of those signs of deterioration have happened in our new home.

Figgy is placed near a non-shaded window and over a heating vent.

He is also keeps closer company with other houseplants, notably spider plants.

He stays green, generates new leaves when old ones drop and is getting slowly taller.

And we don't play a lot of music or talk to him a lot. I wonder what that might do?

Figgy's messages to us nonetheless are:

1. Be thankful for the simple blessings around you that support your ability to live and grow
2. It helps a lot to keep company with some different but like-hearted, like-spirited souls.

“Look at the fig tree. Look at all the trees”.

There’s a wealth of helpful information, forward messaging available to us in natural forests. The more undisturbed by human impact they are, the better

I wonder if Jesus was tuned into that when he gave such advice to his followers.

Botanists, arborists, naturalists, conservationists, forest management personnel, and any number of nature lovers help draw our attention that way.

They open our minds, hearts, and spirits to fascination, and attentive listening and noticing.

One of the most revealing accounts of forest activity, inter-relationships, and resiliency of late was the 2015 English translation of Peter Wohlleben’s The Hidden Life of Trees.

If you’ve already read it, you were likely amazed as I was.

If you haven’t read it: put it on your Christmas list, or invite someone to read it to you.

Yes, forest life is about competitiveness and survival of the fittest.

But it’s also about developing supportive community, resilience, and, restorative powers.

If we venture to immerse ourselves in observation, and other heightened sensory attention, we can open ourselves to wisdom and learning as well as wonderment.

Instead of just walking through the woods and saying, “Oh, that’s beautiful, and that’s smelly, and that’s interesting, and that’s ugly or sad or cruel!”

we can slow down and seek to comprehend, seek to interpret the “signs”.

Wohlleben’s little book invites us to take messages to heart beyond our fascination.

Fascinating that trees can not only touch and taste, but find ways to also hear, smell, even see.

Fascinating that trees can actually feel and experience pain, and take measures to try to heal.

Fascinating that trees often cluster together supportively rather than competitively.

Fascinating how trees use electric-like pulses in their root systems to communicate, generate toxins to repel predatory insects and fungi, can somehow pump water, store nutrients and collaborate with decayed matter beneath them.

Fascinating how they create that protective upper layer canopy, sharing it with other species/

Fascinating how deciduous and coniferous trees differ and adapt in order to try to thrive.

Fascinating how there are mother and parent trees guarding and nurturing young shoots beneath them, knowing full well that only very few of them will make to maturity in such a way as to replace them after they have fallen and died.

Fascinating that trees have the ability to help rain happen in inland spaces away from coasts.

Fascinating that trees are endeavouring to play their part in combating climate change, even though it affects them often more severely than it affects us.

Fascinating, (and Jesus apparently knew or intuited this), that trees can tell time.

Wohlleben talks about their sense of time this way:

“How often have we experienced warm spells in January or February without the oaks and beeches greening up? How do they know that it isn’t yet time to start growing again?

We’ve begun to solve the puzzle with fruit trees, at least. It seems that trees can count! They wait until a certain number of warm days have passed, and only then do they trust that all is well and classify the warm phase as spring.

But warm days alone do not mean spring has arrived.

Shedding leaves and growing new ones depends not only on temperature, but also on how long the days are. Beeches, for example, don't start growing until it is light for at least thirteen hours a day. That in itself is astounding, because, to do this, trees must have some ability to see." 1

Fascinating that trees have not only been in existence longer than humankind, but that they also grow very slowly and can live for hundreds of years even into a thousand years or more, God and natural conditions being their helper.

Beyond such fascination the overall takeaway message is:

"Mutually supportive, life-enhancing community life among species is possible.

We trees are also striving to live into the fullness and wholeness of life that is God's realm."

CONCLUSION

In the midst of a long list of frightening and heart-numbing forthcoming disasters and trouble, Jesus faced his disciples and said, *"Look at the fig tree. Look at all the trees.*

When they sprout leaves you know that summer is near."

Likewise, disruptive, unusual, even terrifying signs may indicate God's realm is also near.

And, between now and then, keep watch and stay resilient. And remain ever hopeful.

For yes, among the fascinating and very true realities of forest life, there is the amazing regenerative power stored and unleashed from dead trunks and rotted stumps.

That's where new shoots, the next generations, are born and from which they are fed.

Ah, echoes in our ears of prophetic words from Jeremiah and Isaiah:

"Behold the days are coming when I shall fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous branch to spring forth for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land." (Jer. 33:14-15)

"There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

And the Spirit of God shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and of power, the spirit of knowledge and awe-filled respect of God....

That one shall not judge by what is seen by the eye or decide by what is heard by the ear; but with righteousness that one shall judge the poor

and decide with equity for the meek of the earth." (Isaiah 11:1-4a)

Ah, insofar as the metaphor fits, embrace it and live into it.

We gather this day at the table of One who in many ways resembles that righteous Branch, that shoot from the stump of Jesse;

One who unveiled and set into motion the inbreaking, world-renewing realm of God.

Is it really any wonder that in order to truly release that transformative energy, that One, Jesus, died on a tree?

And now we, as church, also referred to as the "body of Christ"

get to be generators and agents of that same transforming power, yes?

Remember how that other gospel writer John once imaged it?

That we are branches on the vine?

Does that not make churches something like "branch plants" of God-in-Christ Incorporated?

We are thus mothered into Christ's ongoing ministry and mission.

“Look at the fig tree. Look at all the trees.”

For like the hardiest of trees, we realize that co-dependence is highly unhealthy,
that culturally-absorbed or determined independence is foolhardy,
that only co-operative, collaborative interdependence is God’s order of the day every day.
Indeed, let us be alert, and attuned to, and even engaged in
signs of God’s realm still coming into play, able to withstand the counter-forces,
able to persist through this pandemic, fortified for resilience, recovery, and renewal.
Figgy and I wish all of you not only a blessed, but also hopeful Advent,
even if, like trees, we take it slowly yet with determination. **We, together.**
And may all glory, honour, praise, and thanksgiving be to God, our Living Hope,
who came to us in Jesus, the Christ, the righteous Branch, sprouted shoot of the David-tree.