

We are continuing in our Winter sermon series today called 'Rooted & Growing,' looking at the ways that Scripture uses the language of a tree, or branch, or vine, or other related image to speak specifically about Christ, and thereby drawing us back into the important reality of being rooted in *Christ* and growing in *Him*.

Because if Christ is not at the center, then we won't actually be rooting ourselves in Him but we'll be rooting ourselves in something else. That stability in Christ will not be there.

If our root system or foundation isn't on the Rock that is Jesus, isn't grafted into the Root that is Jesus, then flourishing in our Christian pilgrimage will be a bit of a challenge.

The apostle Paul wrote these words in Colossians 2:6-7: *"So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness."*

In other words, living our lives *in Him* requires a rootedness in Christ, a kind of depth in relationship. Because it's those deep roots that define the kind of growth that we experience.

In his book, "The Deeply Formed Life," Pastor Rich Villodas wrote about his experience with Redwood Trees in California. Some of you might remember this story from our Thanksgiving service last year. Please bear with me; I'm going to share it again. Because it was actually the story that inspired the image for our new logo.

He writes this:

"On a recent speaking trip to the San Francisco area, my family and I spent a weekend at a camp that was surrounded by what seemed like an endless number of redwood trees. When we first encountered these majestic trees on our drive to the camp, I gasped in wonder and amazement.

(If you were here last week, you might recognize here that he was having an experience of awe. He was experiencing a reverent admiration or 'fear' of the Lord in this moment.)

"I'm a city guy. I'm used to tall buildings and crowded streets. But seeing these tall trees crammed together like New York City subway riders during rush hour opened up something in my soul.

"After settling in our cottage, we walked around the campgrounds. For fifteen minutes, I walked with my head craned upward, contemplating these trees that were as tall as two hundred feet. I would learn that some redwood trees grow up to almost four hundred feet, similar to a thirty-seven-story building. It was almost too much for me to take in.

"What I learned about redwood trees.... [is that] these redwood trees are centered and strong

because their roots are robustly intertwined with each other. The roots often go only five or six feet deep, but they extend outward up to a hundred feet from the trunk. Each tree is deeply sustained by the larger, wider system of roots that provides stability, enabling them to grow high into the sky.

“As I learned this new information and studied redwood trees further, I came to the realization that a redwood tree is the core metaphor for Christian spiritual formation that we need in our day. God longs for us to be fully alive, soaring into the sky and bearing witness to God's good life that is available to us.

“But if we hope to be shaped and changed in this way of life, we must have a root system powerful enough to hold us together.”

We must have a root system powerful enough to hold us together. A system that is held together by the Root of Jesse who we looked at last week. Our rootedness with one another grows and deepens and thickens *because of* our rootedness in Him.

And our passage for this morning gives us yet another way that we can deepen ourselves in this metaphor. **Zechariah 3:1-10.**

So at this point in Israel's history, the nation of Israel is no longer a nation. They are a scattered people in exile trying to regroup themselves. The Persians have taken over from the Babylonians, and a man named King Darius is on the throne.

During his reign, there was a prophet named Zechariah who received a number of prophetic visions that specifically spoke to the Lord's desire to return to His people and for the people, then, to rebuild their ruined temple.

Which is interesting. He's not inviting them to rebuild the city, or a palace, or a wall. In other words, this isn't a fight to regain a sense of national security and reattain what they think is rightfully theirs. They are to prepare themselves for God's coming.

Because He is planning to come *regardless* of whether they are a nation unto themselves or not. In other words, God *does not want His people to be a people who seek to possess power.*

Why? Look at the vision of Jerusalem in 2:3: “Run, tell that young man, Jerusalem will be a city without walls because of the great number of people and animals in it. And I myself will be a wall of fire around it, declares the LORD, and I will be its glory within.”

A city without walls? That's unheard of, not to mention a bit vulnerable. If Israel has no military strength or influence or national security, it has no protection.

However, a city without walls, in this case, is metaphorical language for what we talked about last week: the nations being welcomed into the city. The nations coming to seek out *this* God. Part of the hope that is being presented is that *there will be reason* for the nations to seek out *this* God.

Because look at what happens next. This same figure that Zechariah is seeing shows him how the Lord intends to accomplish this. And again, He doesn't give Zechariah images of chariots and horses, military defeats, a big fancy Kingdom.

I know I'm replaying this point, but it has to be said. In this day and age, where nations are going to war against other nations, we *have* to be rooted in *this* story.

The figure shows Zechariah an image of Joshua the high priest, a historical figure in Israel's history, standing before the Lord. And satan is there accusing him.

Why? Because His clothes are filthy, which is a strange image because the garments of the high priest were always assumed to be holy. Everything the high priest wore was intentionally used for holy purposes and added glory and beauty to the priestly office.

But this vision is revealing to Zechariah that even the priestly garments do not cover the stains of sin and brokenness. In other words, we can't try to cover up the reality of sin. Joshua's clothes are soiled beyond imagination, and he can't do anything about it. He can't attain a more holy position or wear holier clothes—it won't make a difference.

Joshua is being appropriately accused. Even as a priest, he's not holy enough to stand before God. He never has been.

But then, in a sudden turn of events, the Lord rebukes satan. Because look at what He does. He *re-clothes* Joshua. While Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes, satan had something to accuse him of.

But the Lord commands His angels to strip Joshua of the soiled clothing and put new ones on him—a sign of the Lord imparting a righteousness on Joshua that is not his own.

This is something totally new. What was once 'hope' in brokenness was not actually true healing.

Because Joshua—and his other priestly colleagues—are now said to be a symbol of what is yet to come. Because verse 8, *"I am going to bring my servant, the Branch."* The Servant Branch. Not the mighty oak. Not the giant redwood. Not even a fig tree.

Through a Branch, God's eyes will see the entire land, a new inscription will be written—perhaps this is alluding to the new covenant—and God *"will remove the sin of this land in a single day."*

In other words, what God just did with Joshua is what He intends to do with everyone *through* this Branch. Which means that this is a pretty powerful branch. A branch who brings complete peace and wellness—which is what the image of sitting under a vine and fig tree is about.

Like the ‘shoot’ that we looked at last week that was growing out of the stump, the Branch is a metaphor that implies new growth. It is a new arm or ‘branch’ of God’s salvation plan, a metaphor that always come *with the expectation* that there will be fruit. The fruit of justice, comfort, and peace.

It is an incredible image of hope in the midst of desperate circumstances.

Here in Zechariah’s vision, the ‘servant Branch’ is God’s chosen instrument for allowing His people to be rooted and experience growth in a new way. Because He will remove their clothes of sin and re-clothe them with righteousness.

With a *branch*, perhaps a small twig, God will remove the sin of the land in a single day.

And according to chapter 6:12, the Branch Himself will re-build the temple (John 2:19) and serve as a Priest *and* King who will advocate for all of His people. He will do what God just did for Joshua, but on a global scale.

No longer will the people of God simply ‘manage’ their brokenness through human ideas of holiness. Rather their brokenness will be *fully healed* by the light—the righteousness, the holiness—of God Himself who will dress their wounds and offer *true* hope.

A few days ago, I read an article that was about the famous American artist, Thomas Kinkead. And if you haven’t come across his work before, here’s an example. He famously called himself the ‘Painter of Light’ because of these incredibly idyllic and Eden-like images that he would paint.

He was incredibly talented, but he received a lot of criticism for creating art that seemed very kitschy and hollow, that lacked meaning or reality. His paintings are ‘sugary and forgettable,’ one critic said.

But what his family discovered, after Kinkead passed away from alcohol poisoning when he was only 54, was a stack of paintings that uncovered the interior life and pain of Kinkead’s upbringing.

Bleak, violent drawings and paintings that seemed to express his inner rage and fear. A shack in the middle of nowhere on a murky night; a nun pointing a gun at herself; giant monsters and distorted faces.

Apparently Kinkead had been raised in a home with a single mother, and on occasions would see his violent father. The home was always cold and dark, because they never had enough money to keep the heat and lights on, and never had a single portrait or painting posted anywhere.

In other words, he was painting what he never had. But because it was an idealized version of it, Kinkead sold himself to the false identity of bringing this kind of idealized 'light' to the people of America, and it never actually brought him healing.

And before we begin to think that this is only a 'him' problem, it's not so dissimilar, I think, to the coping mechanisms we employ in watching movies or TV shows on high-definition screens where everything—acting, writing, even the lighting—is exaggerated.

Exaggerated idealism or escapism is not a true source of healing, but neither is overly emphasized pain and darkness. Yes, his 'hidden' paintings pointed to his true self and source of grief, but even those weren't enough.

What he needed to paint, perhaps, was a shack in the middle of nowhere with a small candle shining a light through the window. What he needed to paint, perhaps, was a nun holding a gun to herself but with a loved one running towards her in the background. What he needed, perhaps, was to paint a monster or distorted face with a small sapling reflecting in its eyes.

What he—and what everyone who lives in this broken world—needs is not a depletion of hope or exaggerated hope but *real* hope. Signs of God's mysterious power at work in unexpected ways.

Signs and messages of hope that—as Jesus reminds us over and over in Scripture—can be found in the smallness of a twig or branch. If we have the eyes to see it.

A number of years ago now, while I was doing graduate studies, a friend and I were going on a walk on a cold, winter day and processing some of the grief and depression that she was experiencing in the wake of a relationship that had recently ended.

And as we were walking, just at the opportune moment, almost poetically, she looked down as she was speaking and gasped in awe.

Because off to the side of where we were walking, there was a large section of natural materials—broken twigs, brown grass, soggy moss, dirt, dead leaves. And perfectly situated in the middle of it was a small green shoot coming out of the ground. And it was exactly what she needed.

Creation shouts the glory of God—even in the smallest of ways. Yes, we can have those moments like Pastor Rich Villodas did when he stood in awe of the redwood trees.

But we can also have moments of awe when God surprises us with a small and unexpected sign of hope. It's just a different kind of awe. Perhaps not the kind that makes our chest pound, but the kind that catches us off-guard when we're just trying to manage our way through life.

Something that's exactly what we need in that moment. Something small, but hopeful. Something that has been left for us to stumble across.

This past week Tuesday, at the memorial service for Dick Noort, we sang a song that's familiar to many of us, including myself; but the words in verse two were a bit more noticeable to me than they've typically been before.

When thru the woods and forest glades I wander
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees,
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur
And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze, [those small signs of hope]

Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee;
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!

When does my soul sing? When I hear His name whispered in the creaking and chirping of creation and it brings me hope. And this has been the message all along. From the moment that the prophets began to speak about the coming King, *this* was how they spoke about Him.

That He would not appear royal or magnificent; and yet how great Thou art. That He had no stately form or majesty that we would look at Him and think much of Him; and yet how great Thou art. That He was the grieving and suffering type rather than the prideful and victorious type; and yet how great Thou art. That He would be a twig or branch rather than a mighty redwood.

That He would be born in a trough and die on a cross. That the Tree of Life would be laid *in* wood and nailed *to* wood. That the creation He made would literally cradle Him in both life and death.

And yet how great Thou art. Why?

Because now in Him, *we* are clothed in His resurrection righteousness. Our stained attire has been taken off, and *we* are now a part of the new creation, grafted into His root system, and bearing in ourselves small signs of life and healing to the places that are experiencing only death.

You might be the one He uses to help someone else stumble across an unexpected sign of hope and have a moment of awe-filled wonder that Almighty God would care about something so small.

Almighty God who became a servant. The Tree who became a branch. The seed that fell into the ground and died so that we could experience new life.

How great Thou art.