

*The Roots of Tall Trees*  
Numbers 13:17-20

A couple of years ago a new novel by Richard Ford was published called *The Overstory*. I'm a little daunted by its 800+ pages, but I love the idea of this book: that the story of what it means to be human can be told in the stories of trees. This author was not the first person to see that trees are social creatures. They care for each other; they communicate and learn; sometimes they trade things among themselves. Trees live aware of the other trees around them. When insects attack a sugar maple tree, for example, it emits signals that warn its neighbors; the other trees nearby immediately reinforce their own defenses. When the roots of Douglas fir trees meet underground, they fuse. Their vascular systems connect, so that if one tree gets ill, another cares for it. Chopping down one tree causes the other trees around it to weaken, as if they're mourning. In the novel, trees speak, sing, experience pain, dream. They remember the past, and they predict the future. Trees, one of the characters says, look a lot like people.

So no wonder, a few years ago, while I was attending a retreat, I chose a tree as the thing in nature I would turn to in the moments when I feel like maybe I'm losing my way. I love the way trees just do their job. Sometimes they stand close to others, sometimes far apart, but wherever it is, they stay where they were planted. They do the work they were given to do, no matter what happens around them. They take up just the right amount of space—their own. They don't grab for some other tree's space or shrink back from their responsibility. They just *are*. They put their arms out and accept whatever the world brings to them. I love that.

In the next few weeks of our worship together, we're using trees as an image for how we think about being in faithful community together—about church. In particular we're talking about the *roots* of trees—the foundation that trees live on, depend on, to grow tall and strong and resilient. And I'll be completely honest with you: we're using this metaphor to talk about *this* church. Because this is the season in which we are inviting you to support this church, to make a conscious and intentional decision to make LAUMC one of your primary financial commitments for the next year.

That's not a decision I expect you will make lightly. Even if we assume that generosity is among your highest values, and that giving is an important way you live your gratitude for what God has given you—and I do assume those things—it's not automatically clear that the church is where you should focus your financial giving. Maybe this year especially. Maybe these months of being apart have made you wonder what will happen to the church, and whether the church is the best place for you to invest yourself in making the world a better place for all people.

I think—I hope—that by June 28, two weeks from today, when we are all joining our commitments together—you'll have what you need to make that decision. That you'll know that LAUMC is a tall tree with deep roots, that these last three months have not bent it from its purpose, and that underneath the canopy of *this* church's leaves is where you want to make your place.

The story of our faith—the narrative of God’s life among humans—is bookended by trees. In the very first story of the Bible, the creation story, there’s a Garden. It is home to Adam and Eve, and right at the center of the garden is the Tree of Life. This is the tree that the humans are invited to eat from freely. Take as much of its fruit as you want, God says to them—this tree will feed you with life and more life.

Then there are lots and lots of other stories, but skip ahead, all the way to the last chapter of the last book of the Bible: Revelation, which imagines a new heaven and a new earth—the re-creation of all that God made at the beginning. The image there is not a garden but a city (and that’s a whole other sermon), but what’s there in the middle of the city? A tree. The Tree of Life, again. “...and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations,” it says. This tree will produce fruit every month of the year, and everyone shall come to eat from it. (Rev. 22:1-2)

If we were looking at the Bible simply as literature, we might say that trees are a *motif* of this book. Trees are a symbol—of many things, but always of life. Human life. All life. And just like life, trees show up in the Bible in lots of forms. Fig trees, cedars, olive trees, oaks. Trees that shelter people and trees that tempt them. Trees that get made into an ark; trees that get made into a cross.

In the text you heard a few minutes ago, the people who followed God in the Hebrew Scriptures stood at the very edge of the promised land. They’d been out in the wilderness for so long—forever, it seemed to them. They had believed, wanted to believe, that this land in front of them would be a safe place to make their home, flowing with milk and honey—sweet and nourishing things. That it would be immediately welcome them, make them comfortable. That here they could rest—because they were so tired. So tired. But they were also afraid. What if this land that was just ahead of them, just over the next mountain, wasn’t as good a place as they’d imagined?

Go ahead and look first, God said to Moses. Satisfy yourselves that this land is all that I promised you. And so Moses sent twelve scouts out into the land of Canaan, and he told them what to look for. ‘Go inspect the land. What’s it like? Are the people who live there strong or weak, few or many? Is the soil they live on good or bad? Are their towns more like neighborhoods or more like fortresses? Is the land rich or poor? *Are there trees in it or not?*’

Are there trees in it or not?

Because a good and hospitable earth, all good land, has trees in it.

Trees show up again in the story of these people hundreds of years later, long after they’d inhabited this land and, even there, lost their way again. Yes, they lived in the land God promised them; but even there, there were hard times, hard years. Years of drought and scarcity, here too. Times when it was easier to forget than it was to remember that it the God who had brought them here wanted good for them. Again a tree told them what they needed to know. The prophet Jeremiah said to them,

*Happy are those who trust in the Lord, who rely on the Lord.  
They will be like trees planted by the streams,*

*whose roots reach down to the water.  
They won't fear drought when it comes;  
their leaves will remain green.  
They won't be stressed in the time of drought  
or fail to bear fruit.*

When you trust God, Jeremiah said, you're like a tree whose roots are deep, deep enough to tap into the water held deep in the earth. A tree that stays green and fruitful even when the world around you is harsh and dry and uncomfortable.

In the country of Niger, in Africa, there was an old tree, called the Tree of Ténéré, in the middle of the Sahara Desert. People called it the most isolated tree on earth; there are no other trees, not even any plants, around it for miles in the dry, sandy desert. People who spent time in that desert knew there wasn't enough water there to keep *anything* alive. But somehow that one tree survived. It became a landmark. For generations, caravan guides stopped next to it to pray before crossing the rest of the Sahara. No one could figure it out: How did that tree stay alive, out there in the middle of that parched, barren desert?

In 1938, the French military dug a well next to the tree, and they found a water table—118 feet below the ground. That's the height of a 10-story building. That tree had survived because its roots had sunk deeper than any other tree or plant known to scientists had ever done. In the place where a seed had been planted once, a tree grew. It hung on, through dry seasons and windstorms, until its roots stretched all the way down to water—118 feet. That tree had dug deep roots—stubbornly persistent roots—to find the water that was hidden in the ground, right underneath it.

Let's anthropomorphize that tree a little bit. Imagine that tree's train of thought when water got hard to find. Maybe a moment of panic: should it spread its roots out laterally, go out searching someplace else for the water that would nourish its young branches? If the tree had done that, it would have fallen over years earlier—the first time it was buffeted by winds. No...it's like the tree knew that this was its place, and that its only salvation—the key to its long and healthy life—was to go deep, to occupy fully this place in the desert. And so, through years and years when there was no rain, when no water came easily, it kept digging down, trusting that there, underneath it somewhere, was the water that would sustain it, give it what it needed for life.

This church, like every growing thing, is living this year through a hard season. But it stands, still. Its leaves are green and it is bearing fruit, because this community of faithful people has deep roots—roots that reach all the way to the Source of our life; to the One who has come with us through the desert and is with us always. It is rooted and grounded in this place. May you find water here too.