

The Roots of Tall Trees
Genesis 18:1-8

Almost two years ago, on the day Sam and Kristie Blewis got married in this church, about 400 people gathered under the oak tree right outside the front doors of this sanctuary for a photograph. Finding a place for that many people under the branches of that tree was not hard. That tree is huge; the span of its leaves must be close to a hundred feet.

The tree is a ‘live oak’, if you want to get more specific; a variety of oak tree that is evergreen—which means that it doesn’t drop its leaves during the year. Years ago, when John and Sue Dodson lived in the church’s parsonage, that tree was in the house’s front yard. That makes it sound pretty old, but it’s even older than that. This tree, we think, is probably close to three hundred years old. That means it was already growing when the Civil War happened. It was here before California was part of the United States. Slavery was legal in this country for almost half of that tree’s life.

I’ve been thinking a lot about trees in this season of our worship when we’re talking about the roots of trees that grow tall. And so this week I did a little research on this particular live oak tree. (‘Research’ may be dignifying what I did a little too much, but I talked with John Dodson and Harvey Dixon and Harold Caudle.) They pointed out to me that several branches of that tree are held in place by cables—which is part of how you take care of ancient oak trees. Harvey told me about a moment during construction of the sanctuary when it looked for a minute like someone might dig a trench right through one of the tree’s roots, and the panic he felt about anything that put at risk this treasure on the church’s property. John remembered a story that at one point Santa Clara University considered moving its campus here, onto this land with the oak trees on it, but I think that might be urban legend. Nonetheless, this church has always lived under the shade of that live oak tree. It was here long before we were. It does not belong to us; in some ways this church belongs to it.

Distinctive trees often define places. Palo Alto was named after a particular kind of redwood tree. Alameda means “grove of poplar trees.” Sausalito means, in Spanish, “little willow grove.”

Abraham and Sarah, the ancestors of all Jewish, Muslim and Christian people, also lived under oak trees. Literally, their address was “The Oaks at Mamre.” Today that sounds like an upscale housing development, but then it was probably a collection of tents with animals wandering around in the yard. The story we read this morning happened right there, on a hot day, under the shade of the oak trees.

Let me set the stage for that story. In the story of our tradition, Abraham was the first faithful person on earth. He shows up in Genesis Chapter 12, and every story until chapter 12 is about humans who just couldn’t manage to live as the friends of God they were created to be. There was Adam who ate fruit from the one tree that was off-limits to him and got kicked out of the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve’s children, Cain and Abel, whose brotherly wrestling matches

turned deadly. Noah, and the flood that suggests God was so frustrated with creation that God wanted to wipe the slate clean and start over. The Tower of Babel, another story of ego-driven humans run amuck. That's a lot of failure in the first eleven chapters of a book.

And then finally God finds Abraham, when Abraham is already 75 years old. (75! starting to think about his 60th high school reunion.) God said to Abraham, 'Come with me. I know you're settled, and old—but I'm asking you to move, to change. If you can do this, if you're willing come to a place I want to show you, I will make you and your descendants a blessing to every family on earth.' And that promise was music to Abraham's ears, because the one thing he and his wife Sarah didn't have, the thing that made their lives feel godforsaken, was that they didn't have children. Couldn't have children. 'I will give you descendants' was the best part of God's promise to him.

Only...the story we're focusing on today is 24 years later. Abraham is 99 years old, and he still doesn't have the children God promised. So I wonder what he was thinking, as he sat in the doorway to his tent on that hot day, under the shade of an oak tree at Mamre. I wonder if he was reflecting on his life, on the decisions he'd made. Asking himself whether he'd bet his life and his faith on a promise that at that moment seemed totally ill-advised, maybe even crazy.

Suddenly he looked up, and three people came into focus. Strangers—he'd never seen those men before. If it crossed his mind to be afraid or nervous about what they wanted from him, he didn't show it. If Abraham was tired and unsure on that day that all his giving things up and moving around trying to do what he *thought* God was asking of him had been worth anything, he tucked his dark feelings away. Whatever his mood was, he put it aside and turned toward those strangers.

He ran out of his tent, the Bible says; and he bowed to greet them. He treated them like royalty, as if he'd been waiting all day for their arrival. 'Come in,' he said. 'Sit down. Let me make you comfortable. Can you stay for lunch? Abraham hurried into the tent and said to Sarah, 'Can you make some bread? Use that flour we usually save for Christmas. I want this to be nice.' He picked out the finest meat, the best cheese. The story in the Bible makes it sound like it only took a minute to prepare that meal, but it had to have taken hours. I bet those travelers took a nap. Finally it was ready. In the custom of a host with honored guests, Abraham set the meal in front of them and stood there under the tree while they ate. It was an act of extraordinary hospitality.

Why did Abraham do this? What prompted that outpouring of energy and generosity toward strangers he'd never met and had no reason to expect anything from? Well, I don't know, exactly, but I'm going to guess a little. Abraham had been on the road for twenty-four years, ever since God got him moving with a promise that still, by the way, hadn't been filled. But along the way, as Abraham and Sarah traveled, they'd had lots of chances to arrive in a new place and be greeted. They knew what it meant to be welcomed, and not.

In this place, under some oak trees just like this one, they'd stayed for a while. Here they'd found shade from the hot sun, a place where they and their animals could get water and rest. Maybe they'd imagined raising children here, if that ever happened. It was almost as if the oak

trees themselves had welcomed them, shown them the hospitality Abraham was now passing on to strangers.

Because that's what trees do. Good, strong trees give themselves away. Think about it. Trees provide shade for anyone who walks under them—anyone. Desert dwellers like Abraham and Sarah no doubt knew then what we know scientifically now: that trees actually lower the temperature of the earth just by standing in between us and the hot sun. Trees breathe in dank carbon dioxide that other living things exhale and turn it back into life-giving oxygen. They offer fruit to feed us. Even in their afterlife, trees give their lives up to be useful to others; there's so much integrity and strength in their bodies, that they become that solid thing we call wood. Wood that gets made into instruments that create music. Smashed into pulp that becomes the paper to hold our words, our stories, our journaled secrets. Sliced into boards that make our homes.

I'm sure the oak trees at Mamre taught Abraham something about how to be hospitable and generous, just like this oak tree teaches us.

Here's the thing about trees, and this great, old tree that marks this church's campus. This tree doesn't belong to LAUMC—clearly. It was here long before the church settled on this land. Nor does the church belong to this tree. We live in a culture that is so focused on *owning* things, naming what is mine and what is not, taking responsibility for the things that are ours and no more, investing in what will return something to us. Life as a series of transactions. Church and trees both speak of a different economy, God's economy. A system that's not about buying something, or giving because of the payoff, but giving because this is how we bless one another and bless the earth. Giving because we are created in the image of a giving God.

This week, in preparation for our Commitment Sunday on June 28, we're inviting you to commit yourself to give financially to this church in the year that begins on July 1. I don't expect that the church will be the only way you participate in God's economic system, giving for the sake of others. The church is not the only instrument of God's work in the world. But think of the church as your personal trainer. When you give to the church every week, or every month, you're exercising your giving muscle, working out so that muscle is fit and ready for every occasion that calls for generosity.

One last word on that Abraham story. It turns out, those strangers who visited, and who sat down for that lavish meal that Abraham and Sarah put on for them, were angels. They were there to bring good news. Within the year, the promise Abraham and Sarah had almost stopped hoping for was fulfilled. Their child was born; they named him Isaac, which means 'God laughs.' The generosity of that day under the oak tree turned into a fountain of blessings.

May it be so for us. May it be so for you.