

The Roots of Tall Trees
Isaiah 55:1-12

Today I'm on the north side of the sanctuary at LAUMC, just across the walkway from the oak tree we talked about last week in this series we're calling *The Roots of Tall Trees*. These are redwood trees behind me, and they're much younger than the 300-year-old oak. In fact, these trees were planted in about 1977, just after another oak tree on this spot fell over on a Thanksgiving Day.

Redwoods are different trees than oaks. If we imagine that trees have human qualities—personality, temperament—we might say redwoods think differently than oaks. They experience the world differently, and so they've found a different way to live. Like different people, both belong here; both are attached to this same church.

Coastal redwoods like these are stubborn about living. They grow fast, and they can grow almost anywhere. They've learned to thrive in earthquake country, and so even when the ground isn't flat and even like it is here—where it's sloped or tilted, redwood trees find a way to grow tall and straight. They do that by buttressing the downhill side of their root structure, reinforcing it so it can bear more of the weight of the tree.

Because they grow in California—fire country—the bark of redwood trees is thick, so that when there's a forest fire, the bark acts as a shield against heat. These trees have also adapted to the danger of pests—ants, termites—by the evolution of their chemical composition. More than other trees, redwoods are heavy with tannin, which is distasteful, even poisonous, to those insects. And these trees are resourceful; they've learned how to pull moisture out of fog, so they can get by even in long seasons of drought.

Sometimes in a forest, you can see redwood trees that grow in circles. Those circles are called *fairy rings*, or *cathedrals*. They happen when a large tree dies and leaves behind seeds and that thing we call the redwood's *burl*. The burl holds the genetic code of the mother tree. And so around the stump of that mother tree a circle of new trees grows, around that dying, decaying center that is rich with nutrients. And then there's a gap at the top, where the missing central tree creates a hole in the canopy, so that light can reach the newer trees as they grow. It's like a family, a community of trees with the same DNA, the same mother, a common movement toward growth.

I read an interview with Richard Powers, the author of the novel *The Overstory*. He worked at Stanford for a while, and he said he often would leave the relentlessly intense and money-focused atmosphere of Silicon Valley to go out and walk among the redwood trees in the Santa Cruz mountains. Those trees were like a cloister for him, he said; they restored his perspective. When he got back to campus, Powers realized that he was surrounded by trees there too. This is what he said: "Those trees began to open to me. Each started to reveal some odd quirk or treasure—spines on their trunks, incense smells, or two radically different kinds of leaves on the same individual. The more I read and the more I looked, the more remarkable these creatures

seemed to me. They were architects and biochemists, trying out every conceivable combination of skills and techniques in their repertoire of survival.”

Maybe the Church is a little like redwood trees in some of those ways. In its stubborn resistance to the things that could kill it—conflicts, changes that feel like earthquakes, years of drought when the environment is inhospitable. In the way its members—we—depend on each other for remembering the genetic code that gives us our identity, held stronger when we stay connected in a circle of support. In the ways we change and adapt to *be the Church*—the hands and feet and heart of God in the world—no matter what the need is in front of us at this moment: the urgent consequences of a pandemic, the long-term commitment to racial injustice.

I’ll tell you one more way we learn about who we are from trees.

Do you remember an experiment called Biosphere 2? It was created in the early 1990’s, in Arizona, as a testing ground for what life might be like on other planets. Inside those completely sealed buildings they put plants and animals and humans, the best and hardiest species they could find. The plan was for them to live together for two years, to learn new ways of farming and disease control and life preservation, and to create a completely self-sufficient, controlled sub-climate. If they could do it here, in artificially created conditions, they thought, maybe humans could do the same thing in a place that that was not naturally hospitable to life.

The experiment turned out to be kind of a mess, but it yielded some interesting findings before it was abandoned. Like this one: inside the sheltered Biosphere environment, the trees grew really fast. Really fast. But they fell over—literally they just fell down—before they finished growing. When scientists studied this phenomenon—the trees’ bark and root and vascular systems—they figured out why those trees fell over. It was because there was no wind inside the Biosphere 2. In the outside world, wind helps make trees strong, because it keeps them moving. In response to the wind, trees develop something called *stress wood*. It’s got different cell structure. Stress wood allows trees to contort their trunks and their branches to reach toward the best light, and to survive harsh conditions. Without the stress of wind, trees can’t develop the resources, the capacity, to live long and well.

The premise of the novel *The Overstory* is that while the human characters lived their own lives of drama and relationships and change—the *understory*, in a way—there was another story—an *overstory*—that you could see in the life of the trees above them, and that added a dimension of meaning and significance to those human lives.

We too are people who live in an *overstory*. Our lives too are given meaning and significance by a set of experiences, truths, that is bigger than our individual lives. We find our place in life by finding our place in the story of God’s unwavering, love, God’s persistent longing for relationships of flourishing and growth for creation. For connection—with us, with all people, with all of this.

Our overstory too says that living beings flourish when they develop the resources that only wind and hardship can create in them. It’s there again and again in this story: the lessons learned in forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the clarity of identity that came with exile—years and

years of being far away from home, the healing that was possible, even to those who had known only suffering before.

I think maybe we're living through the wind right now. It's stressful—this not being able to gather in person, or even to see the people whose faces and hugs you've relied on for a sense of community. It's de-stabilizing—these days of being reminded vividly that we are part of a set of systems, a way of life that has been harming some while it paves the way for others. It's unsettling—to not have any idea if or when our everyday lives will ever again feel like something we recognize as 'normal'. I know.

But the trees' story would tell us that this wind is creating in us the strengthening fiber of stress wood. And our God's story says that no matter how distant we feel from what we have known, God's hand is holding us tight, never letting go, growing something in us now that might not be visible until much later.

That's the confidence out of which we're asking you to make your financial commitment to this church for the coming year. There's a little *as if*-ness that might be required for you to increase your commitment this year, or even to promise that you'll be able to give what you were able to commit to a year ago. But the people of this story know a lot about how to live *as if*. As if we already know that the church and its work will emerge from this windstorm stronger and more capable than it was before. As if you will be held, safe, well, no matter what. So we're asking you: Give as if all that is true. Maybe give as if you have more faith than you feel like you do.

In the middle of the Exile, when the people of God were in a bigger and longer windstorm than they had imagined possible, when they had no idea how they had gotten so far from home or how they would ever find their way back, a prophet—Isaiah—spoke for God. While they were still stressed and destabilized and unsettled, this is what he said to them:

*My plans aren't your plans,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.*

*Just as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways,
and my plans than your plans.*

...
*you will be brought back in peace.
Even the mountains and the hills will burst into song before you;
and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.*

May it be so for us.