September 2021

Dear Friends in the Journey,

This summer I was fortunate to get to spend a little time outdoors. Specifically I was in places that had forests and was able to spend 3 – 4 days at a time in those places. It was really refreshing.

This summer I also read Peter Wohlleben’s book *The Heartbeat of Trees* (Greystone Books, 2021) which is a follow up to his amazing earlier work *The Secret Life of Trees*. This also enriched my summer.

Humans have had a long history with trees and specifically with forests, and Wohlleben helps us understand so much more about that connection through research, story and reflection.

Not everyone has the ability to go into the forest, and so many of us live in urban environments that have been stripped of all of their trees. Even if this is your situation, I’d recommend the book! And Wohlleben cites research that says:

- Even a single tree by the front door improves health and well being

- The addition of ten trees to a residential neighborhood improved the health of the residents as much as an increase in income of $10,000/year

- Being around trees decreases the likelihood of heart and circulatory diseases in humans

He goes on to say that if being around trees is good, being in forests is even better!

All very interesting, you say, but why are you talking about trees and forests in the monthly bible study reflections?

Well, first of all, they are part of God’s creation and God seems pretty taken by them.

Secondly, trees are the third most mentioned entities (behind God and people) in the bible.

And thirdly, according to Matthew Sleeth who wrote *Reforesting Faith: What Trees Teach Us About the Nature of God and His Love for Us[[1]](#footnote-1)*, “Christianity is the only religion that weaves trees from one end of its sacred text to another. Every important character and every major event has a tree marking the spot. There is a tree in the first and last chapter of the bible, in the first psalm, and in the first gospel (p.5).” And if you still need more, Jesus said the kingdom of God is like a tree!

This is why we will consider trees this month!

I do hope that you are holding up throughout all of the constant challenges that come our way these days. Wishing you the strength and resilience of trees as you go about your days. And, as always, if you have any feedback, ideas or topics you’d want to see covered in these monthly guidelines, please do reach out!

Blessings,

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**I. Fire-Starter Questions**[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. Did you have a tree (or a forest) that you had a special relationship with or played in growing up? Do you have one these days?

2. What is your favorite tree? Why?

3. Have trees played any special role in your life or have they had any significance in your life events?[[3]](#footnote-3)

**II. Some Scripture Passages for Reflection**

**Jeremiah 17: 7-8**

*“But blessed is the person who trusts me and remains with me [says God]. They’re like trees replanted in Eden, putting down roots near the rivers— Never a worry through the hottest of summers, never dropping a leaf, Serene and calm through droughts, bearing fresh fruit every season.”*

**Isaiah 61: 1 – 3**

*The Spirit of God, the Master, is on me because God anointed me.  
He sent me to preach good news to the poor, heal the heartbroken,  
Announce freedom to all captives, pardon all prisoners.  
God sent me to announce the year of his grace—a celebration of God’s destruction of our enemies— and to comfort all who mourn,  
To care for the needs of all who mourn in Zion, give them bouquets of roses instead of ashes,  
Messages of joy instead of news of doom, a praising heart instead of a languid spirit.  
Rename them “Oaks of Righteousness” planted by God to display his glory.*

**Matthew 13: 31-32**

*[Jesus told] another story. “God’s kingdom is like an acorn that a farmer plants. It is quite small as seeds go, but in the course of years it grows into a huge oak tree, and eagles build nests in it.”*

**III. Some Questions for Reflection**

1. How would you describe where your spiritual “roots” are planted these days? To what extent do they feel secure and nourished and able to withstand trials and tribulations?

2. What messages of joy would our world need these days that might stand as oaks of righteousness for all to see?

3. How do you understand Jesus’ story of the acorn with respect to the faith/spiritual life?

**IV. Commentary**

For some time now, I have been aware of and thinking about the natural world as revelation. Richard Rohr says it succinctly when he says, “Nature is the first bible.” So if we want to learn about God and the spiritual life, we need only look to the natural world.

What I was not as aware of, however, is how much trees (and forests) appeared in the scriptures. I mean, I knew that they were there from reading the bible, but as was mentioned earlier, they are the 3rd most frequently mentioned topic in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. It is also clear that Jesus himself saw them as a primary form of revelation.

I was struck in writing these reflections that Jesus (see the passage above from MT 13) where Jesus tells us straight away that the kingdom of God is like a tree! But I also re-read Isaiah 61 which Jesus reads from as he is starting his public ministry in Luke (4:16-21). Some have said that this passage is his “mission statement” in many ways and announces what he’s going to be about. I have always heard about the good news to the poor and setting the captives free, but I seldom heard anyone ever mention the oaks of righteousness part. Trees were part of Jesus vision from the beginning of his ministry.

My sense is that Jesus – like many others of his time – had a much closer relationship to the land and drew both inspiration and spiritual teaching from it.

I will also say that reading Wohlleben’s book, *The Heartbeat of Trees*, really opened up a lot for me. I had read his prior book a few years back which was quite amazing (and I’d highly recommend) about the hidden life of trees[[4]](#footnote-4). His current book, however, gets much more into the relationship of human to trees throughout our history. Here are some amazing things he says:

* Humans are one of the few mammals that even have the ability to see the color green (due to the presence of specific cones in our retina). He suspects that this was a developmental adaptation related to survival but also (as mentioned earlier) may have been to help improve our state of mind.
* Wood from trees has been a source of warmth and cooking for humans for at least 1.7 million years (and maybe even 4 million years). Thus we as a species have a very old relationship with trees for survival in many parts of the world.
* Forms of “tree-worship” (meaning specific religious and spiritual practices associated with indigenous peoples around the planet but especially Celtic people) have been around for about 10,000 years and many of these practices were “adopted” into Christianity through colonization and assimilation (think about Christmas trees!)

Wohlleben is also clear that we, as a species and especially in the modern era, have decimated the forests. Almost no old growth forests remain. Deforestation is widespread, and many humans have lost vital connections to trees and forests (which he says have a greater impact than getting more money on our emotional health). It reminds me a lot of the quote attributed to the indigenous elder Chief Seattle that “only when the last tree is cut down, the last river poisoned, and the last fish is dead that you (white people) will realize that you cannot eat money.”

I suspect that in the time of Jesus, this disappearance of the forests was already a reality that he and so many others knew. The Hebrew scriptures often speak about the vast and awe-inspiring “cedars of Lebanon” which had been ancient forests in the Middle East that theologian Ched Myers says were “to the Mediterranean cultures of antiquity what the redwood was to the nineteenth-century Americans coming to California[[5]](#footnote-5).” In part they were revered as majestic but quickly became an exploited economic asset (just like in our country).

The Hebrew prophets – and likely Jesus himself – associated the destruction of the forests with the project of empire and as something to be resisted. In fact, the prophetic tradition sees the restoration of the forests as the sign of God’s activity in the world and especially the faithfulness of the people. Meaning – when the people are in right relationship with each other, with the earth and with God, the forests will flourish. Isaiah (41: 17-20) says it this way, “I’ll plant the red cedar in that treeless wasteland, also acacia, myrtle, and olive. I’ll place the cypress in the desert, with plenty of oaks and pines. Everyone will see this. No one can miss it—unavoidable, indisputable evidence.” I wonder what our current situation says about the relationship we are in with each other, God and the planet…

So if we return back to the question I posed in the introduction related to what trees have to do with the bible and our spiritual lives, we might now conclude that they have everything to do with our spiritual lives and our faith lives!

A few years back, an activist friend from Detroit, Kim Redigan, published a beautiful piece on trees. She was reflecting on our modern discipleship journey and what trees might have to teach us about our faith. In her reflection, *Taught by the Trees*, she says[[6]](#footnote-6),

*We lack the solidness, simplicity, beauty, and graciousness of those ancient trees mourned and celebrated in Palestine and Greece. Trees that throughout history and scripture have stood as silent sentries, witness bearers to the full range of human experience. Fruit trees that have been lovingly named and nurtured. Poplar trees used by good church-going folks to lynch their black neighbors on warm Sunday afternoons. Wide-armed trees that delight in offering cool respite to the tired traveler. Thick-trunked trees felled in their prime by corporations looking for profits.*

*Trees that will teach us if only we will listen.*

*To be a radical disciple for me means silently sitting at the feet of the trees in my life in order to learn what it means to stand still and grow deep roots without running away from home when what I am up against feels overwhelming. It means resisting the impulse to retreat into numbing addictions or mindless activism when my anger or sense powerlessness overcome me. It means letting the soil of my heart be composted by both grief and gratitude.*

Now you may not consider yourself a “radical disciple” or even aspire to be. But part of our faith journey – no matter who we are – is to find our place in creation. Part of that place is thinking about our relationship to the trees and forests, and, as she says, sitting at their feet.

And if the scriptural tradition does not convince you to re-spect trees (literally meaning to ‘look again’), then perhaps Dr. Seuss might. In his very prescient book The Lorax[[7]](#footnote-7), the Once-ler (who in many respects represents empire’s relationship with nature) is told, “I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees. I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues.” The book goes on to chronicle the destruction of the forest, but not before the Lorax has warned the Once-ler again and again. Finally it ends with this

*The Lorax said nothing. Just gave me a glance... just gave me a very sad, sad backward glance... as he lifted himself by the seat of his pants. And I'll never forget the grim look on his face when he hoisted himself and took leave of this place, through a hole in the smog, without leaving a trace. And all that the Lorax left here in this mess was a small pile of rocks, with one word... UNLESS.*

*Whatever that meant, well, I just couldn't guess. That was long, long ago. But each day since that day I've sat here and worried and worried away. Through the years, while my buildings have fallen apart, I've worried about it with all of my heart. But now, says the Once-ler, Now that you're here, the word of the Lorax seems perfectly clear. UNLESS someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not.*

May we be ones who care a whole awful lot.

**V. Action Step**

One action I will take after reading these reflections is…

1. Waterbook, 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As I wrote the word “fire” I realized how dependent we are on trees! [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. And, again, thinking broadly about the role of trees in our lives, I invite you to think about all of the wooden objects you are connected to, wood that builds our houses, fuels our campfires or enables us to do the work we do. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *The Hidden Life of Trees* (Penguin Books, 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://inquiries2015.files.wordpress.com/2007/01/07-1-f-the-cedar-has-fallen-prophets-vs-imperial-clearcutting-p.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://radicaldiscipleship.net/2019/03/25/taught-by-the-trees/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Random House, 1971 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)