

Sermon Dec. 8, 2019

Charlie Fuller

Title: *A Subversive Stump*

Text: Isaiah 11:1-10

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.
A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;
A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;
A tree that may in Summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair;
Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
Who intimately lives with rain.
Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.

That was the poem, *Trees*, by Alfred Joyce Kilmer. You may very well have studied that poem in school.

Hear these words by Mary Colborne-Veel

Song of the Trees

1

We are the Trees.

Our dark and leafy glade
Bands the bright earth with softer mysteries.
Beneath us changed and tamed the seasons run:
In burning zones, we build against the sun
Long centuries of shade.

2

We are the Trees,
Who grow for man's desire,
Heat in our faithful hearts, and fruits that please.
Dwelling beneath our tents, he lightly gains
The few sufficiencies his life attains—
Shelter, and food, and fire.

3

We are the Trees
That by great waters stand,
By rills that murmur to our murmuring bees.
And where, in tracts all desolate and waste,
The palm-foot stays, man follows on, to taste
Springs in the desert sand.

4

We are the Trees
Who travel where he goes
Over the vast, inhuman, wandering seas.
His tutors we, in that adventure brave—
He launched with us upon the untried wave,
And now its mastery knows.

5

We are the Trees
Who bear him company
In life and death. His happy sylvan ease
He wins through us; through us, his cities spread
That like a forest guard his unfenced head
'Gainst storm and bitter sky.

6

We are the Trees.

On us the dying rest
Their strange, sad eyes, in farewell messages.
And we, his comrades still, since earth began,
Wave mournful boughs above the grave of man,
And coffin his cold breast.

And one more by Lorine Neidecker

My friend tree
I sawed you down
but I must attend
an older friend
the sun.

What is it about a tree that we find even our best poems fade in comparison? When I was eighteen and leaving North Little Rock for Baylor back in the day, my Arkansas born-and-bred family asked me: "Why are you going to Texas for college? It's flat and treeless. Why would you want to live there?" I told them that Waco had some trees, especially down by the Brazos, and that it was only truly flat and treeless out in West Texas. I also told them that I would never live out there, but five years later that's exactly where Cindy and I were. But that's a story for another sermon.

Right now, we're talking about trees. I love live oak trees. They spread their limbs out and keep their leaves all year long. They provide lots and lots of shade. As you all know there are many live oak trees on the Baylor campus. There's one right in front of Waco Hall that's massive now and was massive forty years ago -

when Cindy and I would sit in a swing hanging from one of those muscular limbs.

What is it about a tree?

Growing up in Arkansas I learned a lot about trees. I learned about pine trees. Pine trees have a long, long tap root that goes straight down into the ground. When I was a kid, my dad and I were pulling up a little pine tree that had planted itself in the back yard. The little tree was probably only about four feet tall, but the tap root was at least that long. We pulled and pulled before we finally got that root out of the ground. When a bad storm with high winds comes through, sometimes a pine tree will just snap over and fall to the ground. It has a limited ability to sway with the wind because the roots don't go very wide. When we lived in Arkadelphia, as soon as we could afford it, I took out the pine trees on our property . When a large pine tree snaps in a storm, it can go all the way through a house and injure or kill people inside.

What is it about a tree?

While pine trees grow roots straight down, oak trees spread their roots horizontally as far as they can go. Their roots go wide, but not too deep. If you have a windstorm after days and days of rain, you can often see oak trees blown over, roots and all. The entire root ball is exposed for all to see. The tree's roots didn't go deeply enough and the wet soil couldn't hold the tree up against the raging wind.

What is it about a tree?

Trees do lots of great things for us. One thing they do is filter carbon dioxide out of the air. It's been estimated that if every person on earth planted a tree, we could reduce the amount of greenhouse gas in the air by six percent. Six percent is a bigger

deal than it seems. That could be a climate game changer. And just think how bad climate change might be if we didn't already have the number of trees we have. And yet another reason we so desperately need to preserve the Amazon rain forest.

Trees provide us beauty when our hearts are needy, shade when the sun is hot, wood when we need a table or chair, and a symbol of strength when we feel weak and inadequate.

What is it about a tree?

The Psalmist says: (Psalm 1)

Blessed is the one

who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,

² but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
and who meditates on his law day and night.

³ That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers.

The prophet Jeremiah echoes:

“But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord,
whose confidence is in him.

⁸ They will be like a tree planted by the water
that sends out its roots by the stream.

It does not fear when heat comes;
its leaves are always green.

It has no worries in a year of drought
and never fails to bear fruit.”

In today's text, Isaiah is talking about a tree. In this case, it's the family tree of their once-mighty monarchy. The Davidic line of kings.

It's the family tree of their nation, their source of power among their neighboring nations, their source of identity and security.

Isaiah says that it's been cut down. Dropped to the ground. Fallen from the sky. No more shade. No more swings hanging from its branches.

Their nation is in an unexpected, chaotic, and terrifying time. Their safety, security, and very identity are under attack.

The tree is gone.

But Isaiah says the tree will sprout again. Isaiah proclaims that even this dead stump of a nation has the hope of life to come. There's a small, green, leafy sprig emerging from that graying, dead, stump that once supported a great nation. Something new is on its way.

The sprout from this dead family tree is God's one to come. One that is strong, wise and understanding. Righteous, faithful, and fair. This one will be an advocate for the poor, for justice, and for the ways of God. Isaiah is describing the long-awaited Messiah – God's chosen one.

The tree is not dead after all; there will be a 2nd chapter to this story. But what will that chapter look like?

Isaiah continues with a description of the world that is to come. But it's not what the listener expects. The world to come isn't going to look like the world before. Something subversive is at hand.

Isaiah's ancient listeners expect a mighty warrior leader to lead them back to political power and economic greatness. They're looking back to the days of Solomon when the other nations respected their power to make war.

But Isaiah describes a world where peace reigns supreme.

Wolves are going to playing around with lambs instead of eating them. Leopards are going to be taking naps with goats instead of ripping them limb from limb. Lions are going to be out in the pasture grazing like cattle instead of on the hunt for something to kill. It's an unbelievable picture – unless you can see it through the eyes of faith.

It's a description of "cosmic peace." A universal peace – as in peace for everything in the universe. A peace not just for humans, but for all of God's creation. A peace for everything that has breath and, maybe for everything that has life. Maybe for bushes and grass and bacteria and germs and – maybe for trees, too.

You'll notice that the only humans mentioned in this cosmic picture of peace are children. Children playing with snakes. Children leading the way. No wonder Jesus said that we were to become as "little children" before we could enter God's kingdom. Maybe you have to be like a child to truly understand the peace that Isaiah's describing.

What a beautiful world! A world of peace that goes deep, all the way down to our very atoms. A peace that's so incredible, so beautiful, and so pervasive that it transcends language. A peace that can only be described in metaphor. An unbelievable peace. A peace brought to us by God's anointed one, God's chosen one,

the one whose coming we anticipate this beautiful season of Advent.

You've probably already realized that I love trees. Short trees. Tall trees. Skinny trees. Broad trees.

Cindy and I are fortunate enough to own a little cabin up in the Ozarks. It's on the side of a mountain and has a wonderful view. I don't know if that's God's country or not, but you can see it from there. And we have a porch with a swing on the side of that mountain where you can literally see for probably fifty miles to the horizon. Cindy and I both love to spend hours just sitting on that swing soaking in God's creation.

But that view comes at a price. Every couple of years we (as in I) have to cut back the saplings that spring up on the hillside. It's amazing how quickly they grow and how tall they become on that steep incline. If I don't cut them back, we'll have a cabin in the woods instead of a cabin with a view. It's tricky moving around on that hillside and I have a small chainsaw to do the work. Every time I clear those trees, I tell Cindy, "Maybe I won't ever have to do that again."

But guess what? Yep. Those dead, gray, small, rotting stumps that I leave behind will sprout again the next spring. And in a couple of years they'll be threatening to block our view. The warm sun and the soaking rains that come often in the Ozarks will sustain new growth in those seemingly dead stumps. Even on a steep hillside where you wouldn't think anything would find enough depth of soil to grow, much less come back from the dead.

What are the stumps in your life? What are the parts of your life that seem like they'll never live again? Where do you need to find peace this morning? Unexpected peace. Unlikely peace. Subversive peace. Cosmic peace.

I'm here to tell you this morning that this peace is both in the here-and-now and in the future to come. It's a peace for the universe, but it's also a peace that soaks down into the smallest parts of our lives. It's a peace for our relationships and it's also a peace for our very souls.

That's the peace for which we're preparing this Advent. A peace that comes from the unlikeliest of places – even from a stump.

May it be so. Amen.