

First Advent – Living in Hope
Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen
NPMC – Nov. 28, 2021

Scripture: Jeremiah 33:14-16 and Luke 21:25-33

Hymns: O Come, O Come, Immanuel (VT 210/HWB 172; VT verses 1, 3, 6, 7), O How Shall I Receive Thee (VT 215/HWB 182)

Jeremiah 33:14-16:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

Luke 21:25-33:

²⁵ “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶ People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

²⁷ Then they will see ‘the Son of [Humanity] coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory.

²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

²⁹ Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰ as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum, Wie Gruen sind deine Blaetter.”

We have arrived at the first Sunday of Advent. This is the time when we transform our sanctuary for the season, putting up a beautiful tree and our Advent candle wreath and other decor. Some churches even have a special worship service for this, called “The Hanging of the Greens,” when evergreen Advent decorations and Christmas trees are put up throughout the church building. At our house, we’ve had a Christmas tree up for several weeks already, since we’ve felt the need for extra Christmas cheer during this second pandemic Christmas.

What is it about this greenery in our homes and churches and other buildings that lifts our spirits at this time of year? At first glance, it's really simple: in this time when nature is dormant in our part of the world, when everything is hibernating in the dark, under a blanket of snow, greenery and light remind us of spring, giving us hope for the end of the cold, long nights of winter. That's why evergreens are our traditional Christmas trees – they never lose that green colour, not even in the dead of winter. So surrounding ourselves with greenery reminds us of birth and new life at the most unexpected time of the year, grounding our hope.

In our two Bible passages for today, hope is also tied to new life and greening trees. The prophet Jeremiah speaks about God's promises at a time when the Israelites are losing hope. Taken into exile in Babylon, far from their homeland, these are the people who have laid down by the waters of Babylon and wept at the destruction of Jerusalem, temple and all, in Psalm 137. They do not know how long this exile will last, or if they will ever return home; they do not know whether this defeat means the end of their people. Into this somewhat hopeless situation, Jeremiah speaks clear words of hope, of God's promises of a return and a restoration of Judah and Jerusalem fulfilled. And his chosen image to illustrate this hope is of "a righteous Branch to spring up for David" – a branch that "shall execute justice and righteousness in the land," bringing salvation and safety. This is, of course, a reference to the Messiah, the royal one who is to come from King David's family tree to bring about justice and set everything right for the Israelites. The prophet Isaiah uses very similar terms, speaking about the Messiah as a "shoot from the stump of Jesse" – Jesse being King David's father (Isaiah 11:1).



During the hopeless times of the Babylonian exile, when their nation seems to be cut off and lifeless like a stump, God will bring new hope. A shoot will grow from the stump, a new seedling will sprout that will cause the whole tree to green with life again. That is Jeremiah's word of hope to the exiles in their lifeless wilderness: You are not cut off. New life will take root and grow.

It reminds me of the movie *The Lorax*, based on the Dr. Seuss book (a favourite at our house). In the town

of Thneedville, in the middle of a polluted and smoggy landscape, there are no real trees – only inflatable ones and electric ones that use 96 batteries! As a result, everyone has to buy pre-packaged fresh air. But when some kids discover that real trees – soft Truffula trees – used to grow all around there before they were clear-cut, they set out to find and sprout the last Truffula seed of all. This tiny seedling becomes something so precious, something symbolizing the resilient hope of new life, and a fresh start.

Jesus also speaks about trees in our passage from Luke 21 for today. He begins with some downright frightening words about the coming redemption and the classic

apocalyptic signs that it is near: signs in the sky, confused nations, fear and foreboding, roaring seas. But then he turns to a much more comforting image: that of trees reawakening in Spring. “Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near” (V. 29-31). There is a series of parables in Luke about what the kingdom of God is like: the kingdom of God is like a woman looking for a lost coin, or a shepherd looking for one lost sheep, or yeast, or a mustard seed. Here, the kingdom of God is like greening trees, letting us know that summer is coming. If the end of the world is like summer coming, that doesn’t sound so bad, now does it? Yes, it involves the end of something – the end of the cold and darkness of winter. But I don’t think any of us would think to be afraid of the new life of Spring, as transformative as it is. Imagine a prophet crying, “Repent, the end is near! It will feel like ... springtime.” Maybe he should have led with that instead...

I appreciate this image because of what it tells us about the kingdom or kin-dom of God and what it tells us about hope. The kingdom of God in so many of these parables is compared with life-giving things – mustard seeds growing into bushes to hold nests for the birds, yeast leavening a whole batch of dough to feed hungry bellies, and so on. These are ordinary images of life being fed and nurtured. And in telling us to look to the trees for the signs of the season, Jesus reminds us of the nature of hope: it doesn’t necessarily break into our lives in extraordinary ways. Instead, it’s as regular as the seasons, built into the cycle of life itself, inseparable from it. As miraculous and as

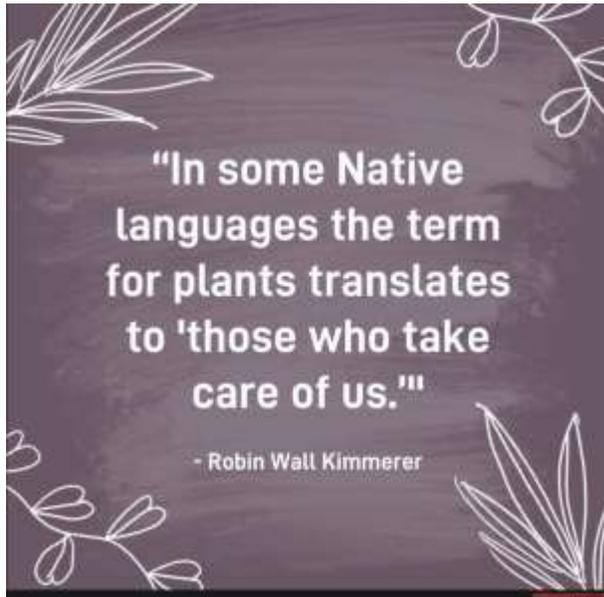
ordinary as the coming of Spring, our hopes are refreshed and renewed and revived with the sight of tiny green buds dotting bare branches.

Of course the Bible is full of tree imagery, so this image for the kingdom of God fits right in. From the tree of life and the tree of wisdom (also known as the knowledge of good and evil) in the Garden of Eden at the beginning of creation, to the trees of the fields clapping their hands in Isaiah 55, to the branch of Jesse, Jesus the True Vine, and the cross as the Tree of Life, there is a whole forest-worth of tree symbolism in our Bibles! Revelation also ends with the tree by the river in the city of God, with leaves that bring healing to the nations. In this way, our Biblical story is bookended by symbolic trees bringing life, healing, and hope.

But perhaps the benefits of trees are more than just symbolic. There is more and more research these days showing the mental and physical health benefits of spending time among trees – a practice called “Forest Bathing.” Spending time among trees with no set agenda has been found to relax us deeply, reducing our stress levels and boosting our immune systems, soothing our minds, bodies, and spirits. In Japan, it’s known as *Shinrin-yoku*, forest bathing or forest therapy, and it’s been prescribed as “preventative medicine” there since the 1980s, especially for those who live in large cities.¹ So trees have come by their symbolism of hope and healing honestly – it seems they really do help us. This is why we’re drawn to spending time in parks, or along the riverbank, or up north among the trees of Waskesiu or other lakes. Robin Wall Kimmerer echoes this in her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. She writes, “In some Native languages the

¹ <https://www.ontarioparks.com/parksblog/guide-forest-bathing/>

term for plants translates to 'those who take care of us.'"² Whether it's in giving us fruit



to eat, air to breathe, a calm forest to walk in, or medicines, trees really do look after us; our lives are bound up with theirs. No wonder we take trees into our homes each Advent season to mark this time of year.

So as we hang the greens these days, putting up Christmas trees and wreaths and garlands in our homes, workplaces, and our church building, may

we take heart. May our hopes be revived and sustained by the sight of all this green amid the bleakness of winter. May we be reminded of God's promises of life and renewal when we feel cut off. Let's look to Jesus, the new shoot growing from the stump of Jesse, our Comforter who assures us that the coming of the kingdom of God is as certain and as near as the next Spring, with its buds and blossoms and greenery. Let's live in this hope this Advent season, and be thankful. AMEN

² Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 229.