

Isaiah 55:6-13
Luke 19:37-40

Roots & Rocks

July 16, 2023

Isaiah 55:6-13 (NRSV Translation)

Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Luke 19:37-40

As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying,

‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!’

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, order your disciples to stop.’ He answered, ‘I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.’

Part 1: The Trees Are Talking

- Prayer (Voices Together #1012 adapted): O Tree of Calvary, send your roots deep down into our hearts. Gather together the soil of our hearts, the sands of our fickleness, the mud of our desires. Bind them all together. O Tree of Calvary, interlace them with your strong roots, entwine them with the network of your love.

Slide: Tiefengrund Tree Fall (I)

Two weeks ago, the remains of the storm which basically wiped our Carstairs, AB and did damage in Didsberry roared its way northwest. A big tree at Shekinah came down as did quite a number in Nippewan. The following Tuesday I learned that the Tiefengrund church yard also took a hit. Three trees were blown down and three more had lost their tops—snap, crackle and pop I thought to myself.

Slide: Tiefengrund Tree Fall (II)

People figured the big tree which had been closest to the building was actually planted when the first Tiefengrund church was built some 110 ten years ago. The stories that tree could tell-- weddings, funerals, grave-side services, picnics, important post-worship conversations, maybe even a stray kiss or two among amorous youth.

In the biblical narrative trees are not passive creatures. They watch, talk, and clap their hands. In Isaiah 55 they are part of a creation choir which offers praise to their creator. In Judges 9 Jotham recounts a parable of the trees in which they speak together in their woodland language. Trees offer shelter: Abraham and Sarah (Gen 18), Deborah (Judges 4), Jonah (Jonah 4) are examples of those who set up their tents underneath the trees to be sheltered from the sun. The rules set down for conducting ethical warfare in Deuteronomy 20 clearly state that no fruit bearing tree should ever be cut down. Zacchaeus finds what he is looking for, none other than Jesus, from in the boughs of a sycamore tree (Luke 19). Trees also have held a sacred and active role within religious systems beyond Christianity.

Slide: Bohdi Tree

One day, seated beneath the Bodhi tree (the tree of awakening) Siddhartha became deeply absorbed in meditation, and reflected on his experience of life—affluence,

parenthood, and poverty. He finally achieved Enlightenment and became the Buddha.¹ It was under the Bodhi tree this all happened.

In the Ancient Near East trees were connected with fertility and goddess devotion. They were also symbols given to kings and dynasties.² The root of Jesse in Isaiah 11 and the cedar of Ezekiel 31 are examples of this.

In Norse mythology the giant ash Yggdrasil is the world tree and associated with both life and death. It is said to be the source of renewed life after the catastrophic final war of the gods (Ragnarök).³ In the telling of this myth, the ash tree protects survivors of the war of the gods, and they find a way to new worlds.

Slide: Trees Talking Underground

Science is beginning to document the very active manner in which trees talk.⁴ Suzanne Simard (*Finding the Mother Tree*) and Peter Wohlleben (*The Hidden Life of Trees*) are two proponents of trees talking. Wohlleben is a German scientist who calls a healthy forest the ‘wood-wide web’ in his German-accented English. “All the trees here, and in every forest that is not too damaged, are connected to each other through underground fungal networks. Trees share water and nutrients through the networks, and also use them to communicate. They send distress signals about drought and disease, for example, or insect attacks, and other trees alter their behavior when they receive these messages...

The fine, hairlike root tips of trees join together with microscopic fungal filaments to form the basic links of the network, which appears to operate as a symbiotic relationship between trees and fungi, or perhaps an economic exchange. As a kind of fee for services, the fungi consume about 30 percent of the sugar that trees photosynthesize from sunlight. The sugar is what fuels the fungi, as they scavenge the soil for nitrogen, phosphorus and other mineral nutrients, which are then absorbed and consumed by the trees.

Monica Gagliano at the University of Western Australia has gathered evidence that some plants may also emit and detect sounds, and in particular, a crackling noise in the roots at a frequency of 220 hertz, inaudible to humans.

Slide: African Acacia Tree

Trees also communicate through the air, using pheromones and other scent signals. Wohlleben’s favorite example occurs on the hot, dusty savannas of sub-

¹ [BBC - Religions - Buddhism: The Buddha](#)

² [Sacred Trees in the Garden of Eden and Their Near Eastern Precursors | Michaela Bauks - Academia.edu](#)

³ [Yggdrasil | Norse mythology | Britannica](#)

⁴ Not all scientists agree; see, for example, [The Idea That Trees Talk to Cooperate Is Misleading - Scientific American](#)

Saharan Africa, where the wide-crowned umbrella thorn acacia is the emblematic tree. When a giraffe starts chewing acacia leaves, the tree notices the injury and emits a distress signal in the form of ethylene gas. Upon detecting this gas, neighboring acacias start pumping tannins into their leaves. In large enough quantities these compounds can sicken or even kill large herbivores”.⁵

Slide: Christ the Tree of Life Icon

In Christianity we have sacred trees as well; the trees of knowledge and life in the Garden of Eden for example. In Christian tradition Jesus Christ is the apple tree. He represents a fusion of the trees of life and knowledge alongside the tree of Calvary on which he was hung. Knowledge and life are held together in Jesus. The way of the cross is none other than the way of wisdom, nourishment, and life.

Given that trees talk and that we are tree people of Jesus Christ, what might be the discipleship of the trees? What are we hearing from the central tree of our wisdom tradition when it comes to ecological sustainability? What are the other tree colonies saying who seek the survival of the forest? Trees exhale and inhale their breathe—what does that mean for advocacy? The trees are watching, listening, and talking.

Slide: Rocks in a Pile

Part II: Rocks that Cry Out

- Prayer (Voices Together #883 adapted): Sing and sing. And when you cannot raise a note of song, the rocks will cry out. And when the echoing stones go still, in the dangerous crevice that is your heart, if you lie still, there remains an altar, a way to enter a terrible holiness, a lush and delicate calm.

In the biblical testimony, Rocks and stones serve an important role within the narrative. Abraham buys a cave and hews a tomb out of it to keep his dead relatives safe as they sleep in the shelter of the rock (Gen 23); Jesus, too, rests in a tomb hewn out of rock (Matt 27:60). While in flight for his life, Jacob uses a rock as a pillow, dreams a glorious dream, and names that place Beth-El—house of God (Gen 28). In Joshua 4, Joshua is told twice to erect stones (ebenezers) which will prompt the next generation to ask—what do these stones mean?

Slide: Eben-Ezer stone

⁵ [Do Trees Talk to Each Other? | Science | Smithsonian Magazine](#)

Ebenezer is a composite word of two Hebrew terms: “eben” (or even) meaning rock and “ezer” which means help—the rock that helps. Any concordance will show how replete the Old Testament is with references to “God as rock”—these usually denote stability and security. Jesus tells a parable about a wise man building his house on a rock (Matt 7:28). Jesus renames Simon as Peter, which literally means rock in Greek, and says that on this rock the church will be built (Matt 16:18). Both Paul and Peter, in their letters, use the cornerstone imagery to describe who Jesus is (1st Cor 3:12 & 1st Peter 2:6); and this image comes from Isaiah 28:16. 1st Peter describes Jesus as a “living stone” and encourages the young church to also be “living stones” built upon the Living Stone (1st Peter 2:4-6). Then we have today’s selection from Luke where the stones will cry out if we do not.

The discipleship of rocks... We still utilize rocks to promote shelter, security, stability and memory. Memory—think of the headstones, statues, and images carved into stone. Sand dams, which has been a project of MCC, has saved and improved the lives of millions—and sand is but another form of rock.⁶ But not all images or structures in stone are welcome.

Slide: Crazy Horse Monument

The Discipleship of the Rocks: Crazy Horse of the Lakato is having his image inscribed into the Black Hills of the U.S. Some Lakato, and others, have serious concerns about the monument. It requires blasting into stone of the Black Hills which many indigenous consider sacred—it would be like blasting into the rock of the Temple Mount, the cliffs of Dover, or Whistler Mountain to craft an image. In addition to that bit of sacrilege, Crazy Horse was a man of modesty: no pictures, no fancy dress, no elaborate burial.⁷ Who speaks for Crazy Horse and the rock?

In this 50th anniversary of the musical *Godspell*, I was reminded of a song late in the program called “By My Side”. As I interpret the lyrics, there is rock who tags along with a wayward walker. The pebble and walker talk. They go together even as the song transitions to the betrayal scene. In Jesus we have a Living Stone, a Cornerstone, a Keystone, who will never leave or forsake us even when we enter the shadowlands. Can we learn to trust that there is a rock which walks with us wherever we go?

In this country there has much controversy about stone statues of people who promoted a system of injustice in relation to our aboriginal citizens. John A. McDonald statues have been pulled down in some places and defaced in others. In Chief Whitecap Park on the south side of town has a CP monument which was

⁶ “Water is life: Sand dams and MCC”: [Water is life: Sand dams and MCC | Mennonite Central Committee Canada \(mccc.ca\)](http://www.mccc.ca)

⁷ [Who Speaks for Crazy Horse? | The New Yorker](http://www.nytimes.com)

splashed in red paint—alluding to the spilled blood resulting from land confiscation and distribution. Many monuments of our national past hold some of these tensions. How shall we use stones wisely? The children may one day ask about the stones we have raised and what shall we say?

I close this rocking section with a citation of Isaiah 51:1-- “Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug.” Words from Chief Seattle underscore the sacredness of all creatures and creation. It is how I will conclude my sermon. He says,

Slide: Chief Seattle

“Humankind did not weave the web of life. We are but one strand within it. Whatever we do to the web we do to ourselves.”

In his early twenties Seattle was named the chief of his tribe...it fell to Seattle to set a strategy for dealing with the [white] invaders and their insatiable claims. Seattle rejected the option of violent resistance and put his trust in the possibilities of peaceful dialogue. But as the full intentions of the whites became clear his goal was reduced simply to ensuring the survival of his people.

In 1830 Seattle and many of the Indians in Puget Sound converted to Christianity. As a leader of his people he tried to integrate the principles of his faith with the beliefs of his ancestors. Ultimately, Seattle came to believe that the struggle with the whites really represented the contrast between conflicting spiritual values. In particular, the Indians and the whites held to completely different understandings of the relationship between human beings and the earth.

The whites considered the land something to be bought and sold. As Seattle observed, “How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us...Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people...We are part of the earth and it is part of us.”

[Seattle] ultimately signed a treaty to save his people from complete eradication. He took opportunity, however, to present the president Franklin Pierce with a letter. In it he wrote: “One thing we know, which the White Man may one day discover—our God is the same God. You may think now that you own Him as you wish to own our land; but you cannot. He is the God of humanity, and his compassion is equal for the red man and the white. The earth is precious to him, and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its Creator...Even the white man

cannot be exempt from the common destiny. We may be brothers after all. We shall see.”⁸ Amen.

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church

Hymn of Response: “This Is God’s Wondrous World” VT #180

Questions for Consideration:

Consider the important trees in your life. How do you interact with them?

Consider the important rocks in your life. What do these rocks mean to you?
What might they mean for your children, grand-children, nieces and nephews?

How do you keep rooted // keep grounded in this ever-changing world?

Order of Worship

Prelude (Kathy)

Welcome & Announcements (Patrick)

Call to Worship (Patrick)

Gathering Hymn:

“Christ Is Our Cornerstone” VT #4

“My Hope Is Built On Nothing Less” # 621 VT

Lighting of the Peace Lamp (Brent Guenther)

Time with the Children (Brent)

Hymn: “I Saw a Tree by the Riverside” # 514 VT

Joys, Concerns and Congregational Prayer (Brent)

Hymn: “O Blessed Spring” #522 VT

Scripture: Isaiah 55:6-13

Luke 19:37-40 (Marie Guenther)

Sermon: Roots and Rocks (Patrick)

Hymn: “This Is God’s Wondrous World” #180 VT

Benediction (Patrick)

Sending Hymn: “You Shall Go Out With Joy” VT #847

⁸ Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses For Our Time* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co, 2010 edition), pp 248-249.