



“The Tree Did Not Die”
Scripture – Revelation 7:9-17
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, May 12, 2019

If you have been to the redwood forests in northern California, you know that these massive trees defy description. Their immensity so eclipses any other tree that using the adjective “gargantuan” is not hyperbole.

There are actually two distinct species of trees called redwoods. Giant Sequoias grow only in California’s Sierra Nevada Mountains and can be 23 feet in diameter and can reach 280 feet tall. The second species, Coastal Redwoods, “are the tallest living things on our planet”¹ and have been known to soar 360 feet. That is taller than any building in Wilmington.

A few years ago, when Camilla and I walked in one of California’s redwood forests, I remember feeling overwhelmed by the grandeur of God’s creation. Like standing on a mountaintop in the Rockies or the Alps, I was awed by the natural world and felt enveloped in holiness.

Writer, Omid Safi, tells of the time he and a friend hiked in California’s Muir Woods. Trekking among these amazing giants and soaking in “the melody of the leaves, frogs, birds, and creeks, he began to hear the ultimate scripture: the natural cosmos.”²

Like most people, every few steps, he would tilt his head back, and try to spot the top of one of the mammoth beauties. Eventually, he began to focus more at ground level, and when he did, he noticed something peculiar. He “noticed circles of redwoods, almost as if they were dancing around a shorter, dead-looking single redwood. The central redwood often looked charred, burned to the core. (He wondered) was it destroyed by a human fire or perhaps a lightning bolt? His initial response was sadness – perhaps a careless human had burned down a living thing. But a sign by one of these rings stopped him in his tracks...(The sign read):

“Hundreds of years ago a single large redwood grew here. Then disaster struck. The trunk of the large redwood was killed, perhaps by repeated and severe wildfire. From here you can see the original tree trunk still standing upright, now a dead and blackened snag.”

“Despite such terrible damage, the tree did not die. Below the ground, its massive root system was full of vitality. Before long, hundreds of young, bright green burl sprouts began to come up around the circle formed by the root crown of the original tree. Some of those sprouts have grown into the full-sized trees that today stand in a circle around the original trunk.”³

The tree did not die because it lives on in the many trees to which it gave birth – the family of trees that now surround their ancient ancestor. Isn't that a beautiful metaphor of human life?

Mother's Day is a bittersweet day for many of us. I cherish the beautiful memories I have of my mother, but I also mourn the fact that I cannot hug or kiss her. I cannot enjoy a Thanksgiving feast with her or hear her tell a story from when she was growing up. I cannot delve into what it was like for her during World War II when she and dad were newlyweds but he was in the Atlantic Ocean on a Destroyer Escort searching for German submarines and she was praying that no Nazi torpedo find his ship. I have so many questions that I should have asked when she was alive, and now there are great gaps in my family history that I will never recover.

However, along with the regrets, I also rejoice that she cared for me and nurtured me as an infant, tried her best to give me a solid moral foundation, took me to church and helped me grasp the importance of a spiritual life, bequeathed to me much of her determined spirit but also worked tirelessly to soften my edges so that the determination did not simply become bullheadedness. (Some might say she did not entirely succeed!) I am grateful she was sitting in the stands at my countless football and baseball games, taught me to respect all people – no exceptions – and helped me gain an understanding of what is genuinely important in life.

When I ponder this metaphor of the circle of redwoods that have life as a result of the charred redwood in the center, I can picture my mother as that central tree whose roots extend into my core and give me life. I can see many ways that she did not simply vanish from this earth when she died, but in numerous ways continues to live in me.

I am doubly blessed because the metaphor also works for my father. There are numerous ways in which his roots also pumped life into me and he continues to live in me. I give thanks to God for my wonderful parents.

Safi continues: "The tree did not die. And our ancestors live in us. We are who we are because they loved us, through and after their earthly life. They live in us, through us, long after their bodies are charred and returned to the Earth....May there be new loved ones circling us, as we circle our ancestors."⁴

We will live on in those who come after us through our DNA, but also in the non-material ways we infuse their lives, with love, courage, gratitude, and other habits of the heart. However, as followers of Jesus, the circle of trees serves not only as a metaphor of the way our ancestors live on in us and how we will live on in our descendants, but also as a metaphor of how the cross leads to resurrection, how death leads to eternal life. In numerous ways, nature trumpets this model of death giving birth to new life. It is the way of cosmos.

Today's New Testament lectionary reading comes from the Revelation to John. While exiled on the tiny, arid island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, off the western coast of Turkey, John recorded visions he experienced; visions that included impressions of heaven.

There are certain spots on earth that people experience as thin places. These are places where the distance between heaven and earth becomes so thin, that God's eternal kingdom becomes palpable. This can happen in a place in nature, it can happen in a hospital room, and it can happen in the midst of worship when a word of scripture comes to life or through music that sparks something in our soul or in a prayer that prompts a whisper in our mind.

Patmos was a thin place for John, as it was for Camilla and me when, one year, we celebrated Easter in the cave where John lived and wrote. John had a number of visions which he recorded and they made their way into the Bible. By way of his writings, John invites us to peer through the translucent veil to catch a glimpse of heaven.

In today's reading, John envisions people whose bodies have moved beyond the limitations of physical matter. In the words of the Apostle Paul, their perishable nature has put on imperishability, their mortal bodies have put

on immortality. Living as we do, in an age that over emphasizes physical matter to the detriment of spiritual realities, we do well to remember that no one has ever seen a thought, yet that is where we spend much of our time.⁵

In his vision, John says that he sees such a great multitude of people in heaven that they would be impossible to count. And not only are there numbers massive, but they come from every nation, every tribe, every people, and every language. For those who want to limit those in heaven to people like themselves, they are in for a big surprise! They will be singing in a heavenly choir comprised of people of all races, sexual orientations, economic standing, and religious affiliation. Because the God of creation, the One who was and is and is to come is a loving God who seeks to heal and transform us all.

In our world, there is so much pain and division, enmity and strife, that it is difficult if not impossible to imagine a better day. Yet John tells us that one day, these things will be no more. It's like the wonderful line in the movie, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*: "Everything will be all right in the end. If it's not all right, it is not yet the end."

John says that in the end, there will be no hunger, no thirst, no pain, and no suffering because God will be our shepherd who will guide us to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe every tear from our eyes.

The tree was scorched, burnt to a crisp,
black and barren and hushed.

But the tree did not die,
it was gloriously transformed

because the Holy One is a God of resurrection
who continually gives birth to new life.

May you one day peer through the gossamer veil
and behold the beautiful surprise.

NOTES

1. Betsy Malloy, "California Redwood Forests," *Tripsavvy.com*, updated November 12, 2018.
2. Omid Safi, "The Tree Did Not Die," *OnBeing.org*, February 28, 2018.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. I cannot remember to whom I should credit this statement.

Prayers of the People

Loving and Faithful God, like an excited father who races down the road to welcome home his wayward son,¹ and like a mother hen who gathers her chicks under her wings,² you are like a trustworthy parent who cares for each of her children.

On this day, when we celebrate mothers, we are deeply grateful that you are like our mothers who nurtured us and unselfishly raised us.

You are the creative energy that makes life possible;
you love us and seek the best for us;
you forgive us when we fail to extend kindness and respect;
and you challenge us to become a more Christ-like person.

Gracious God,

we rejoice with those who have given birth to, or adopted a child this year, and we weep with those who have lost a child.

We pray for those who are expecting a child that they may be healthy and receive the proper emotional, physical, and spiritual care.

We pray for those unable to have a child, that they may bear the distress of unfilled dreams and discover other opportunities to form bonds with children.

We pray for those who have been cut off from their children that they may have an empathetic friend who will carry part of the burden.

We pray for those who were abused by their mother, that they may discover loving relationships that help to erase the scars inflicted by a disturbed soul.

We pray for those who must endure unkind words and harmful gestures by their children who are immature or ill.

We pray for those who must be both mother and father to their children.

Eternal God,

we give thanks for stepmothers, who successfully navigate the challenging terrain they must traverse.

We give thanks for aunts and grandmothers who generously bestow love and guidance.

We give thanks for surrogate mothers who provide a blessing for couples.

We give thanks for foster mothers who provide nurture, guidance, and support for children who need a capable and loving parent.

And we give thanks for the mothers of scripture and for the lessons they teach us.

God of love, we rejoice with all mothers who enjoy beautiful bonds with their children; may they know in their souls that they are successfully fulfilling one of the most important jobs in the world by nurturing, guiding, disciplining, encouraging, and supporting the next generation. May those of us who were raised by wonderful mothers express our gratitude for a blessing that continues to grace us throughout our lives. Now, hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together, saying,

“Our Father who art in heaven...”

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1. Luke 15:20
2. Luke 13:34