

September 19, 2021
Psalm 1
“Like a Tree”
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

In his remarkable Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Overstory*, Richard Powers writes: “This is not our world with trees in it. It’s a world of trees, where humans have just arrived.”

Amy and I got a clear view of that truth during our trip to San Francisco last month, walking among giant redwoods for the first time. It was a profoundly moving experience for both of us. I know a good number of you have lived in or visited that part of the country, and know what that’s like. We didn’t see the tallest redwoods, but they were still WAY taller than anything tree we’d ever seen before. It felt ancient, ANCIENT, to stand in their collective presence.

It was Powers’ own experience, seeing a giant redwood for the first time, that inspired him to write the book. It was an experience he described as a “religious conversion” that showed him his place in “a system of meaning that doesn’t begin and end with humans.”

Trees are the protagonists in the novel. It follows and eventually brings together nine human characters whose close relationship with particular trees moves them to a deeper appreciation for that truth. And in most cases, leads them to activism for ecological justice. Activists confronting the global, corporate practice of mass deforestation that contributes so dramatically to climate change. Climate change that has fueled severe heat and drought and increased the likelihood of wildfires. And wildfires that, at this very moment, TODAY, are still raging in California, threatening sequoia groves containing some of the oldest and largest trees on the planet. Some of them more than 3,000 years old!

Wildfires have already consumed more than two million acres in California alone this year, and it’s estimated that two-thirds of giant sequoia grove acreage across the Sierra

Nevada has burned since 2015. Our relationship with trees is tragically one-sided, and increasingly so.

We all know, at least to some extent, what trees do. What they contribute to the well-being of our collective eco-system – both above and below ground. Among many other things:

- **They provide oxygen** through photosynthesis; just one acre of forest absorbs six tons of carbon dioxide and puts out four tons of oxygen, enough to meet the annual breathing needs of 18 people.
- **They control climate** with leaves that provide shade and absorb and filter the sun's energy, keeping things cooler in summer. And by maintaining lower levels of carbon dioxide, they also reduce the heat intensity of the greenhouse effect.
- **They improve air quality** by filtering air, removing dust and other pollutants like carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide.
- **They preserve soil** with far-reaching roots that absorb and store rainwater, thus reducing runoff, preventing erosion and flooding.
- **They provide home** to countless species of insects and animals (not to mention human beings).
- **They provide food** to countless specials of insects and animals, including us.

The Buddha once reflected that “A tree is a wondrous thing that shelters, feeds and protects all living things. It even offers shade to the axmen who destroy it.”

Trees give us a lot, and trees have a lot to teach us. Trees, TREES, are the protagonists in our collective story. And trees, I would argue, are the protagonists in our text this morning from the Psalms – that Carl just read for us.

Those who “delight . . . in the law of the LORD,” meditating on “(God's) law . . . day and night,” are like “trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.”

This is a metaphor spelled out similarly by the prophet Jeremiah, "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is in the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit."

We need trees, and we have A LOT to learn from trees. So looking at this Psalm, the very first Psalm, I don't wanna focus this morning on what it means for us to delight in the law of God, or to put our trust in God. I simply want us to sit with the metaphor awhile. Just sit with the image of a tree. And consider, REALLY consider, what it means to be like a tree.

What it might mean, and what it might actually look like in our lives, to be so deeply rooted and connected. To live our lives from the ground up, and from the ground out.

What it might mean, and what it might actually look like in our lives, to slow down and find the quiet center, as we sang as our way into worship this morning. To let things be. This is the question Mary Oliver considers in one of her poems:

*When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness.
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.*

*I am so distant from the hope of myself,
in which I have goodness, and discernment,
and never hurry through the world
but walk slowly, and bow often.*

*Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, "Stay awhile."
The light flows from their branches.*

*And they call again, "It's simple," they say,
"and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled with light,
and to shine."*

I want us to consider what it might mean, and what it might actually look like in our lives, to help absorb our collective waste and turn it into something profoundly life-giving.

What it might mean, and what it might actually look like in our lives, to help hold together the common ground that helps keep us in touch with the common good. That keeps us from eroding into fear, poverty, division, violence.

What it might mean, and what it might actually look like in our lives, to branch out beyond ourselves with leaves that don't wither. To bear fruit. To be doers of the word, as we considered a few weeks ago in the letter of James, and not just hearers. To provide shade for others, to cool the heat they're feeling in whatever form, to help bring the collective temperature down. To provide shelter, sustenance, so that everyone has what they need.

As would-be, sometimes followers of Jesus, pursuing in fits and starts the narrow, ambitious way of divine love, we are called to be like Jesus. The Psalmist says, "Be like a tree." Stay rooted in God's divine, unending love – as we prayed earlier – so that you might branch out, reach out WAY beyond yourselves, with that same love. Bear the fruit of that same love.

Elsewhere in *The Overstory*, Richard Powers writes, "Love is a tree with branches in forever, with roots in eternity and a trunk nowhere at all."

That's the kind of love we're after. Love like a tree's love. Love like God's love. And so to close I'm gonna invite you to sing. To sing about being like trees.

I'm gonna start with a sweet little song from John Gorka called "Branching Out," and would ask you to join in on the chorus, which goes like this:

*I'm gonna reach, I'm gonna reach, I'm gonna reach for the sky.
I'm gonna reach, I'm gonna reach, I'm gonna reach, 'til I know why.*

And then as our Hymn of Response, we'll sing "We Shall Not Be Moved." We shall not be moved, just like a tree that's planted by the water. A song of unknown origin, first sung,

as a song of personal faith, "I shall not be moved." It was eventually repurposed as a song of solidarity and protest, first with the labor movement and most recognizably with the Civil Rights movement and the Black struggle for freedom in this country.

But first, here's Branching Out:

*When I grow up I want to be a tree
Want to make my home with the birds and the bees
And the squirrels, they can count on me
When I grow up to be a tree*

*I'll let my joints get stiff, put my feet in the ground
Take the winters off and settle down
Keep my clothes 'til they turn brown
When I grow up, I'm gonna settle down*

*I'm gonna reach, I'm gonna reach
I'm gonna reach, reach for the sky
I'm gonna reach, I'm gonna reach
I'm gonna reach, till I know why*

*When the spring comes by I'm gonna get real green
If the dogs come by I'm gonna get real mean
On windy days, I'll bend and lean
When I grow up I'm gonna get real green*

*If I should fall in storm or slumber
Please don't turn me into lumber
I'd rather be a Louisville slugger
Swinging for the seats*

*I'm gonna reach, I'm gonna reach
I'm gonna reach, reach for the sky
I'm gonna reach, I'm gonna reach
I'm gonna reach, till I know why*

May it be so.