

**St. Mary's Episcopal Church / The Rev. Hannah Moderow**  
**February 16, 2025 / Sixth Sunday after Epiphany**

**Scripture Readings:** Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26

I set out to preach on the gospel today, but I kept returning to the image of the Tree in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The image of the Tree Planted by Water that shows up in the book of Jeremiah and a similar image in the first Psalm.

So, bear with me, today we're going to go on a little bit of a tree journey together before we get to Luke's gospel.

Think about this: (and I'll give you a moment to actually think!)

**Today, right now, do you feel more like a Shrub in the Desert? Or like a Tree Planted by Water?**

I'll ask you again:

**Today, right now, do you feel more like a Shrub in the Desert, living in the parched places of the wilderness?... Or like a Tree Planted by Water, sending out its roots by the stream?**

This is not a trick question or some plot to divide us up into TEAM SHRUB over here and TEAM TREE over there.

I admit, as the Scripture is written in Jeremiah, the Shrub in the desert is clearly the bad team and is even called "cursed" Whereas the Tree Planted by Water is clearly the good team, and called "blessed."

But I don't think this passage needs to be read as a way to categorize and separate-- "us" versus "them." If we're being honest with ourselves and each other, we *all* have our Shrub-in-the-desert times of life, don't we? Moments or seasons of drought and isolation—when God feel far off, if not absent altogether.

But that doesn't mean we can't also work our way to become more like Trees...Trees planted by water.

To give a little context, this passage from Jeremiah is considered a wisdom psalm which is a genre that offers up Instructions for a life of faith. Wisdom psalms often include didactic lessons to convey spiritual truths, so it's not uncommon to encounter teachings that have a clear 'good' side and 'bad' side.

This particular wisdom psalm is placed in the book of the prophet Jeremiah, which is a chaotic and traumatic book, set in the Late 7th century, early 6th century BCE during the 40 or so years at the end of Judah's independence before they go into exile in Babylon.

Many Hebrew Bible scholars believe that the chaotic nature of the book reflects the trauma and chaos that was happening to the community at the time.

### **It's hard to make sense of life and faith amidst trauma and chaos, isn't it?**

With the historical background in mind, this little section with the Shrub and the Tree feels like a deep breath—a pause—time for reflection on God, set in the middle of a tumultuous story.

I think this Imagery from nature—the shrub and the tree—can guide us through our own troubled times.

The writer of the text makes it clear that the Shrub represents a person who trusts only in humans. Whereas the Tree Beside the Water represents a person who trusts in God.

Rather than use this passage to divide us up in a dualistic system of Cursed vs. Blessed, what if we imagine these images as fitting into a continuum. Our journeys of faith that undoubtedly waver between Shrub life and Tree life.

Last week, the Reverend Israel preached on the topic of Trust...the trust required of Peter when he followed Jesus into that boat in the beautiful story about the Miraculous Catch of fish.

In that moment when Peter put down his net in the water, after he'd spent a whole night without catching a single fish, he did so with a new kind of TRUST. In that moment, when he put down his net in the water, he was acting more like a Tree planted by water,

trusting in a source outside his own human power and experience. Trusting in a wisdom he didn't fully understand.

The net became so full it began to break, and the fish were so abundant they nearly sank the boat.

Peter's trust in that story, led to wonder and a pivotal experience of God's presence.

### **But Peter doesn't always have that level of trust, does he?**

As the gospel unfolds after that fish story, we know that Peter perpetually wavers between relying on his own strength (or what we might call SHRUB mode) and trusting in Jesus (what we might call Planted by Water mode).

It's not one or the other for Peter. Team Shrub or Team Tree. It's a constant struggle. A natural human push-pull between trust in self and trust in God.

I think that's what makes both Peter's story and this tree imagery so relatable and compelling today.

### **We can see ourselves in these texts, can't we?**

In our world today, it's easy to default into Shrub mode because of our culture's fierce emphasis on individualism... We're encouraged to be better than others... to be wealthier than others... to get ahead of our neighbors more than to love them.

This Tree image from Jeremiah, however, places our source of greatness outside our human selves and human power.

### **The tree image places power in God and an interconnected community.**

In this text, I hear a call not to be solitary trees, but a community of trees planted near Water.

It turns out that current science can add a lot to this understanding of a COMMUNITY of trees. While scientists had long considered forests to be comprised of individual trees,

competing for resources, Forest Ecologist Suzanne Simard's<sup>1</sup> recent research has changed that thinking. By studying underground networks of roots and fungi, she has redefined forests as community, in which plants, fungi and microbes interact with reciprocity and remarkable connectivity.

How cool is that?

With the science in mind, isn't it remarkable to linger with this passage from Jeremiah. To linger with the idea that we're not on an individual journey to become a tree planted by water, but instead to become a community of trees... a vibrant forest, perhaps—interconnected and fed by God.

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Now you might be wondering: what does this Tree passage have to do, if anything, with Jesus' Sermon on the Plains from Luke's gospel? Yes, the passages are quite different in style and topic, and they're separated by centuries and traditions and circumstances.

But here's the thing. Just as the image of a tree planted by water offers up a clear call to interdependence with God and each other, so too does Jesus' Sermon on the Plains have something to say about community life.

We could look at this passage from many angles, but there's one detail I want to point you to today.

**The spatial set up of the scene. How it's laid out in Luke's gospel.**

The night before Jesus delivers the sermon, we know that Jesus "went out to the mountain to pray" (6:12) and "spent the night" there (6:12). Then Jesus called and chose his twelve disciples.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/02/magazine/tree-communication-mycorrhiza.html>

And yet.... Lest we're tempted to think that those twelve disciples were more special than the others, Jesus, at the beginning of our passage for today, comes down with the disciples and **"stood on a level place" (6:17).**

Pay attention to this:

**Before Jesus preaches, he comes down with the disciples to "a level place" (Luke 6:17)...** a level place among "a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon."

When Jesus preaches, it's not to his few called and chosen ones.

No, it's to and among the great multitudes. It's to and among the sick and weary; women and men and children; to and among the called and chosen disciples, but also to the people from all over the place, no *one* special place.

Spatially, this sermon demonstrates a great flattening of power.  
A leveling of Community.

I don't know about you, but I'm getting flickers of the image of Trees—a multitude of trees—setting roots that day by the water.

Friends--Right now, in our world, it seems there are few places where all are truly welcome to stand "on a level place" in community.

There are few places where all are can feel safe and find food and shelter... where all can lament and grieve losses as strongly as they can celebrate joys and success.

There are few places where all are able to stand on a level place and send out roots to a common source—the source of love, life, and healing—that is not made up of human power.

**That's the image I see in Jesus' sermon... and it's a similar image I see in Jeremiah's Tree planted by water.**

A call to beloved community that is a "level place"-- safe, inclusive, and deep-rooted.

We need this leveling of power to receive Jesus' message:

When he says:

*“Blessed are the poor...*

*Blessed are you who are hungry now...*

*Blessed are you who weep now...*

*Blessed are you when people hate you...”*

Jesus literally stands on a “level place” with all of us and tells us to stop with our crazy human power plays.

To be trees planted by water in community.

**Here in Luke’s gospel, Love comes down...**

**Love comes and levels the ground.**

So that we can send out roots to create and live in holy community—for *all* people, no exceptions.

*Amen.*