

**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**



SERMON

June 26, 2022

# Like a Tree

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: June 30, 2022

Sometime during the same century as the birth, death, and resurrection of our savior, in a pine forest on the western slope of the California Sierras, a seedling sprouted from the earth. Safely rooted in her forest habitat along with the other Giant Sequoias, the tree grew and became known as “The Mother of the Forest.”

The Sequoias look like fantastically large mushrooms from an old fairy tale, hundreds of feet of trunk surrounded by Mr. Snuffleupagus fur and capped by a little hood of evergreen. How could anyone gather under their canopy and not fall into awe of God’s majesty?

The Mother of the Forest rose to more than 380’ by the time white settlers discovered her during the Gold Rush in 1849. Eager to turn the earth to profit, some enterprising men decided to take her on tour. Far too large to uproot, they stripped off her thick bark into 8x8 foot panels, sailed it around Cape Horn, and reassembled it for exhibitions in New York and London.

When a fire engulfed the exhibit hall, her dried-out bark also perished, and their money-making scheme ended. Like chaff, it all blew into the wind. Thousands of miles away, flayed of her fireproof skin, the Mother also perished in a forest fire a few years later.

But she did not fall. She remains standing to this day, the marks of saws still visible on her charred trunk. At the top,

where her canopy ought to be, her fire-hollowed frame is in the shape of a mouth, as if crying into the heavens.

Obviously, removing the bark from Mother of the Forest, one of the tallest sequoias, stands as the epitome of living a life focused on selfish gain. Short sightedness. Damaging to the forest. Fatal for her.

From the moment people saw her bark on display, anger festered and intensified when they learned of her demise. Their outrage fueled the passing of laws to protect against future pilfering of the forest.

What a tragedy that we need such laws, and yet as a society we know that we are responsible to protect those who do not have a voice.

God established the world in a perceptible order. Sun and moon give way to seasons. Rain and clouds give way to streams. Birth and death. Individual and communal harmony is evident all around. God invested into each of us a moral conscience and the capacity to grasp right from wrong.

How do we articulate such wisdom?

Among the many genres in scripture, history, letters, laws, is a body of writings considered wisdom literature. Proverbs. Job. Ecclesiastes. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount of the Beatitudes. All teach the nature of a blessed or happy life.

Wisdom literature lays out the way God set up the world to work.

The psalms are considered Hebrew poetry first of all. But many of them also crossover into the biblical genre of wisdom literature. Psalm 1 is one such example. When the ancients arranged the songs, prayers, and liturgical poetry written over centuries into the Book of Psalms, they placed this psalm first.

Before I read, please pray with me.

*Dear God,*

*We ask for your wisdom to discern your way for our lives,  
wisdom to silence those clamoring voices that distracts us,  
wisdom to see your hand in creation,  
to honor the connections we share.*

*Breath your spirit into the words from the psalter  
so this ancient poem inspires our living.*

*God, help us make wise choices as we live in this world you created.*

*Amen.*

### **Psalm 1**

- <sup>1</sup>Happy are those  
    who do not follow the advice of the wicked  
or take the path that sinners tread  
    or sit in the seat of scoffers,
- <sup>2</sup>but their delight is in the law of the LORD,  
    and on God's law they meditate day and night.

<sup>3</sup>They 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.

<sup>4</sup>The wicked are not so  
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

<sup>5</sup>Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment  
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous,  
<sup>6</sup>for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish.

“Happy are those.”

The psalm names a desire that resonates deeply within all of us, a desire to be happy. In the biblical sense, the desire to be happy has nothing to do with material goods or fleeting pleasures.

The Psalmist asks us to imagine trees planted next to streams of water, whose roots find nourishment to yield fruit. Deeply rooted, trees stand firm. They do not thirst for shallow pleasures. The water alludes to God’s word that becomes part of the tree itself, always teaching to seek the good in one another to be the good for one another. Those who meditate on the scripture will walk in the path obedient to God.

Opposite of this rootedness is the wind-blown chaff that follows the whims of others and lacks stability in any part of life. Ignoring the rhythm of a good life, they pursue personal ambitions regardless of the expense to the community. The wicked live in ways that contradict God and threaten the people of God.<sup>1</sup>

A happy person understands that the ebbs and flows of life, in youth or maturity, harvest or scarcity, in the wide-ranging health or sickness, undoubtedly impact each of us. And yet these temporal experiences do not define our worth nor do any of these conditions ever separate us from receiving and giving God's love. Happy arises from living a life in continual awe of God's presence, regardless of our day-to-day circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

The psalmist invites us to become sturdy, like a tree. Pay attention to God's order. Pursue the day-by-day ways that give rise to a good judgement end of our lives. Be happy.

Trees have always been symbols of connection. Ancient Central American mythology depicts an immense tree growing at the center of the universe, stretching its roots into the underworld and cradling earth and heaven in its trunk and branches. Norse cosmology features a similar tree called

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<sup>1</sup> James L. May, *The Psalms: Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Preaching and Teaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994) 90.

<sup>2</sup> Rebeca Blair Young, "Psalm 1," *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 1, Edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox 2010) 344.

Yggdrasil. The oldest of Japanese dramas tells of wedded pines that are eternally bonded despite being separated by a great distance.

Even before rigorous scientific study, we seemed to understand the connection between trees and their forests as symbolic of God's created order. Was it coincidence that before Darwin, naturalists used treelike diagrams to represent the lineages of different species? Yet for most of recorded history, living trees kept an astonishing secret: Their celebrated connectivity is more than metaphor — it is a material reality.

Susan Simard studies trees. She started at a young age in British Columbia, Canada, with her grandfather, a horse logger who followed an old method of selectively culling trees from the forest. Their wanderings in the forest ignited her imagination. She describes the forest as ageless and infinite, pillared with conifers, jeweled with raindrops, and brimming with ferns and fairy bells; "a mythic realm, perfect as it was."

Her passion propelled her through university. In her graduate work, she attempted to answer the question of why modern methods of clear cutting, taking all the trees of a forest, and then replanting it with all the same type of sapling trees yielded fewer trees.

Forests of common trees were less hardy than old growth forests, those with a wide variety of trees. The Douglas fir



saplings became more vulnerable to disease and death whenever nearby aspen, paper birch, and cottonwood were removed.

Rather than just focus on a tree, Simard studied their relationships to soil and each other. By analyzing the DNA in root tips and tracing the movement of molecules through underground conduits, she discovered that fungal threads link nearly every tree in a forest – even trees of different species.

When a seed germinates in an old-growth forest, it immediately taps into an extensive underground community of interspecies partnerships. Carbon, water, nutrients, alarm signals, and hormones can pass from tree to tree.

She found resources tend to flow from the oldest and biggest trees to the youngest and smallest. Chemical alarm signals generated by one tree prepare nearby trees for danger. And if a tree is on the brink of death, it sometimes bequeaths a substantial share of its carbon to its neighbors.

Seedlings severed from these underground lifelines are much more likely to die than those who remain in a network. Those uniform young trees, planted after a clear-cut, are bereft of ancient roots and despite one another's company, live as if they have been orphaned. In her 2016 *TED Talk*, Simard said

veteran trees “send messages of wisdom on to the next generation of seedlings.”<sup>3</sup>

Her work upset the established thinking of Darwinian survival of the fittest. An old-growth forest is not the site of a battle for dominance but an intimate society seeking the good. Competition and cooperation lead to the community’s survival.

The ancients could not have imagined Simard’s chemical analysis documenting underground carbon transfer, and yet in their humility they perceived the wisdom to write “happy” are those who root themselves, like trees near a stream, into a community to share God’s word. Happy are those who live as a part of God’s community, obedient to God’s purposes.

God raises the majestic Sequoias in a forest. The strong support the weak. The older imbue wisdom for the younger. The giants dependent upon the small. Diversity creates health.

This psalm’s simplicity sets down the path for each of us to live lives obedient to God. And it points to scripture’s intent to order communities and not just serve as a personal self-help guide.

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<sup>3</sup> Ferris Jabr, “The Social Life of Forests, *The New York Times*, December 12, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/02/magazine/tree-communication-mycorrhiza.html>

God raises majestic communities, each dependent upon another. Forgiveness and grace renew. No one is to seek a position of power to lord it over another. No one is to profit from oppressing another.

When we remove laws that protect those God created, we will all suffer. On Friday, the Supreme Court's action reversed a long-held right for a woman's right to an abortion. We all know that a woman and her physician will stand before God for decisions about her body, not us. God calls us to love her.

For more than ten years this denomination has advocated for reproductive health, and this church historically spoke out for a woman's right to decide.

And throughout this time, I know beliefs about abortion vary, in the denomination and I imagine in this church.

I know many of you are outraged by Friday's ruling and anticipate some of you felt relief from Friday's ruling. Others may not fully comprehend the magnitude of this decision on the lives of women in their families or particularly women of color who live in poverty.

The wisdom of the ages tells us that God created a world in which our individual welfare always depends upon another's ability to thrive.

Our savior, Jesus, confronted the harshness of laws that denied the humanity of individuals. He opposed those that felt it within their jurisdiction to limit the freedom and dignity of another. And this same legal system that brought his death later was made the fool as God raised him. God's love always prevails. Jesus, God's word incarnate, always teaches us to create community, to sacrifice for one another, to hold each other tenderly, to bridge the divides. And when we stand for another's freedom to live and freedom to choose to marry whom they love, God is near.

Be like a tree. Plant your feet firmly in the earth, God's love. Reach your lives up to the heavens. Be like a tree, ever respectful of those around you. Bring shelter. A bit of shade. A place to nest. Let your leaves rustle in the wind as a symphony. Leave this world a bit richer. Bequeath God's wisdom for daily living.



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