

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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Rooted in Christ

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Introduction: Pando

Jesus once told his disciples to, “Consider the lilies.” The windows of our church invite us to consider the trees of God’s creation, as well.

Do you know what the world’s largest tree is?

There are a few ways to answer this, but a dark horse contender, and the most interesting to me is a tree named, Pando.

Pando means, “I spread.” And that is an understatement for what this tree has done over the past 16,000 years. Pando spreads over 106 acres and weighs over 13.2 million pounds. Pando is an aspen. And aspens have vast underground root systems. Though Pando is one tree, it has an estimated 47,000 stems—each one looks like an individual aspen shooting up from the ground. But below the surface, all 47,000 aspens are really from one root system, sprouting up tree shoot after tree shoot, each one able to grow and thrive for over a hundred years.

You cannot know the size, the strength, or the true stature of a tree without knowing its roots.

This morning, we are dipping into the New Testament book of Colossians. The Colossian church was gathered in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, and most of these Christians were Gentile believers. These were people who grew up within the Roman Empire following the religion of Rome.

And though now they worshiped God and followed the teachings of Jesus, pressures from their culture, their upbringings, and new philosophies, new ideologies pressed in on them. They wanted to hold to what was good and true, but

it was difficult to discern what it meant to be faithful Christians in their time and place.

This letter addresses their sense of being uprooted. And, maybe, our sense of uprootedness, too.

Before we hear the words to the church in Colossae, will you please join me in prayer?

Prayer for Illumination

God of wisdom and wonder,
Open our minds to your truth and our hearts to your grace.
Root us in your love,
so that as we listen for your word,
we might grow in faith and live with courage.
Amen.

Scripture Reading

Colossians 2:6-10, 16-19

⁶As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to walk in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

⁸Watch out that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental principles of the world, and not according to Christ. ⁹For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority...

¹⁶Therefore, do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food or drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or Sabbaths. ¹⁷These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the body belongs to Christ. ¹⁸Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, initiatory

visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking,¹⁹ and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and tendons, grows with a growth that is from God.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

That Which Uproots

We hear in this letter at least three competing forces pushing in on the Colossian church.

First, there was Roman culture. Rome's pantheon offered a way to explain life's chaos through the whims of fickle gods—gods who played favorites and could be swayed by flattery. These gods also sanctioned Rome's power, making loyalty to the empire a kind of moral and religious duty. This was compounded by the imperial cult, rites and rituals that set the emperor up as a deity himself. The message was clear: for Rome to thrive, its gods had to be pleased and its emperor exulted. Christians were looked upon with distrust, as atheists, who refused to participate in religious and civic life. They were pressured to return to their old, less controversial, beliefs and practices.

Second, there was Judaism. Christianity was still new—especially among Gentiles. Many early Christian communities were rooted in Jewish tradition, shaped by generations of law and covenant. Some continued to observe festivals, sacrifices, food laws, purity codes, and circumcision, even as they followed Jesus as Messiah. This raised big questions: Did Gentiles need to become Jewish first? Should Jewish Christians keep the law?

Paul's letters answer with a resounding no. Christ has fulfilled the law through grace. Christians live in freedom. The Jerusalem Council came to a similar, if less decisive, conclusion: Gentile believers did not need to keep kosher, be circumcised, or observe Jewish holy days.

But, not everyone agreed. Some were troubled by what they saw as compromise with Roman culture. They wrote letters and made visits to other faith communities, hoping to correct what they believed were errors in these new churches.

Third, there were gnostic philosophies. These taught that Jesus did not come in the flesh to redeem the world, but in the spirit to lead souls out of it. The material world was believed to be corrupt. To be close to Christ, one had to reject the flesh—through extreme fasting, self-denial, renouncing possessions, and receiving secret spiritual knowledge.

The Christians in Colossae were caught between empire, tradition, and spiritualism—each one pressing and pulling at their identity.

Every time I explore Scripture, I am reminded: humans are always humans. Our context and specifics change, but the pushing and pulling doesn't. It has never been easy to discern what's good, what's true, what's worth building a life around. The letter to the Colossians urges them—and us—not to be taken captive by religious or civic anxiety. Not to get tied in knots over what others demand of our faith and practice.

Christ is enough.

No visions, no ecstatic experience, no emperor or authority, no rituals, no sacrifices can be additive to what they already have in Christ Jesus our Lord.

They, and we, are loved, forgiven, and freed.

Our lives are bound to Christ, now and forever, and not only that, this world, the whole cosmos is being reconciled to

Christ, now and forever.

Christ is enough.

The person, the teachings, the life, death, and resurrection of

Christ is enough.

How does that sit with you?

Is the grace of Christ enough to carry us through the hardest seasons?

Is it enough to be set free from shame and resentment?

Is the way of Christ enough in world bent on war, on retribution, on discrimination, and the hoarding of wealth and resources?

I will admit, I do not feel firmly rooted in this every hour, every day, every season.

It is easy to be uprooted by fear, uncertainty, shame, or pride.

It is easy to be pulled this way and that way, by the philosophies and empty deceits of our own time— whether political ideologies that promise salvation through power, economic theories that masquerade as God-given truth, or the never-ending checklist of moralism or self-improvement, that if we could just work harder, do better, complete that program, read that book, beat ourselves up more, we could

control our way to a good life and control others to a better world.

But none of these are where God is pleased to fully dwell.

It is only in Christ that we find the fullness of God.

It is in Christ that we find abundant life.

It is in Christ that we find peace beyond understanding.

It is in Christ that we will see the reconciliation of all people—of the whole of creation.

So, Colossians exhorts us, when we are under pressure—continue to walk with Christ, rooted and built up in him.

Developing Strong Roots

It wasn't until 1976 that Pando was identified as a single, large aspen.

You cannot really know the stature of a tree without knowing its roots.

It remains the largest tree in the world by weight and landmass. But Pando is one of a few “largest trees in the world.”

The largest by volume is a sequoia in California, named General Sherman.

The largest by height alone is a redwood, also in California, named Hyperion.

All these giants have astounding root systems. Pando is in a class of its own, but General Sherman and Hyperion stretch their roots well over a hundred feet from their base, intertwining with other sequoias and redwoods, to support, sustain, and nourish the whole forest.

Scripture is full of plant-based metaphors for good reason. We can learn from the trees how to root our lives, so we won't be blown over in storms, so we can grow into places of safety for the vulnerable, and so we can bear good fruit.

The good life of a plant begins with its roots. When a seed breaks open beneath the soil, what first emerges are roots.

The Colossian church needed to return to their roots, to what brought them together in the first place; to return simply, unimpressively, but with profound consequences to Jesus—his life, his teachings, his death and resurrection, his presence with them through the Spirit.

The trees—and Scripture—have something to teach us in the way of rooting our lives in Christ. I offer two simple, unimpressive practices that can have profound consequences.

First, abide.

Jesus said from the Gospel of John, “Abide in me, and I will abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.”

Abide is not a very active verb. This is not a command to do more, to be more, to strive for something greater. Remain. Be present.

This may be the most countercultural message Scripture has to offer to our time. It may also be the most powerful antidote to the things that can hold our minds and hearts captive.

Root in Christ by just being present to his grace, to his love, to his peace.

You cannot add or take away anything that Christ has already done for you. You cannot change or expand God's heart to reconcile all things.

But you can dwell in Christ.

And yes, you can do this by walking, by serving, by talking with others. Your heart can abide in Christ at any time.

But may I encourage you to have more intention. And to practice abiding in stillness?

Sometimes, when we're busy doing, we forget how to simply be.

Rest in Christ's grace.

Second, connect.

Turn to your neighbors, left and right, front and back. You are a root system.

The largest trees need their roots to intertwine for strength. If you want to grow, you've got to connect with others.

This is a vulnerable act.

Another's roots might impinge on your space.

They might draw from your resources.

If they're uprooted, you might feel it too.

And yet, you might also find nourishment you didn't know you needed.

You might discover strength in a storm you never could have weathered alone.

You might even find joy in the good soil of a shared, thriving forest—

yes, the metaphor is stretching a bit thin, but you get the point.

Our rooting in Christ is strengthened by our connections with others.

This is where the walking, talking, and serving does come in—face to face and shoulder to shoulder is how we intertwine our lives with others.

So let me encourage you: Reach out this week.

Invite someone into your space. Make room in your schedule.

Share something of yourself. Ask someone to share with you.

These are basic practices. Simple, unimpressive. Not new philosophies or “this will change your life in just 30 days” type of programs.

And that’s kind of the point.

If we want clear discernment and to be faithful witnesses in our time, we need to go back to our roots, holding fast to Christ—his life, teachings, death and resurrection, and ongoing presence with us.

From strong roots, we can bear good fruit, in every generation, under every kind of pressure.

That is more than enough.

Amen.

Questions for conversation or reflection

1. What forces do you think are “uprooters” today?
2. How have you (or could you) practiced abiding?
3. Who is part of your root system?

Prayer of Dedication

God of every generation,

We remember with gratitude the faith and generosity
of those who came before us—

those who planted seeds we now harvest,
who built a foundation we now stand on.

As we offer our gifts today,

shape us to be faithful stewards and good neighbors,
that we might walk through the world with same generosity
we have received.

Amen.



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