

**“Faith or Tree”
by Cathy Love
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Psalm 1: 1-6

Genesis 2: 1-9; 15-17

Mark 11: 12-25

Some people have asked where I get my message topics. God gives me the inspiration. I will be anywhere, not necessarily thinking about a Sunday service when I get an indication to write something down, take a picture or pay attention to a song or music video. God tells me “There’s a message in that.”

A long time ago, the topic of trees was one of those messages. This was in relation to a situation I experienced involving a tree which I will explain shortly. So I started a file in the computer and waited for the right time and right message. I have changed the topic within the message several times until I landed on this one.

The oak tree tells my story. We have a beautiful one we planted in our back yard. When someone close to us was diagnosed with cancer and was given 6 months to live, she was, as I told her, like the oak tree, determining her own timeline. Like the oak tree that doesn’t give up it’s leaves in the fall because that is what is expected, when all the trees in the bush behind our house have lost their leaves, in fact our tree, as with most oak trees, holds some leaves right until the new leaves spring forth. So this person held on to her earthly life past the time she was given. Now, often we find oak leaves at our front door of our house. There is no oak tree near our front door. I often tell Grant we have been visited by this person and it makes me smile.

This tree provides me with reminders of our loved one, gives us shade, a place for the birds, squirrels and chipmunks to shelter. It stands strong in the wind and storms. It is pretty to look at and was a real annoyance to our neighbour as he tried to keep an ice rink going with oak leaves imbedded in the ice with the thaw and freeze this winter.

As we look around even in this sanctuary, how many items are a product of a tree? How many things in your houses come from trees?

Moving on to the Bible, the word tree is mentioned, according to several websites and depending on what version of the Bible, 257 times with 213 times in the Old Testament. This does not include all the extended words related to trees like seed, branch, bud, vine or leaf. I did not try to confirm this by counting myself and we will also not be examining each example. But my hope is to have you leave here just a little bit curious about some of these facts, so you do your own research with your own Bible.

Besides God and people, trees are stated to be the most living creature in the Bible. They stand the tallest, can be the longest living form of life, they support life whether they are dead or alive, can be used to keep us warm, are used to build and furnish our houses, provide us with reading and writing material, become decorative pieces, there is no end to the ability of the tree to provide for us. Their age can be determined by the number of rings which also tells how old a tree was when specific events occurred.

Look around the church at items that once were trees. Trees are everywhere – especially in Northern Ontario.

We first meet trees in the Bible in Genesis (2:8–9), which was our reading this morning. If you recall, after God had created Adam, the Bible specifically mentions two trees amongst all the trees God made grow that were pleasing to the sight and good for food; the trees were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (NASB).

Later in Genesis (2:15–17), God places Adam in the Garden of Eden to eat; but cautions him “from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for on the day that you eat from it you will certainly die” (NASB).

Well, we all know how that turned out. Isn’t it interesting to note that when Adam and Eve ate the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, that they clothed themselves with leaves – from trees and hid from God among the trees?

In researching this topic, God led me to a book called *Reforesting Faith-What Trees Teach Us About the Nature of God and his Love for Us* by Matthew Sleeth, MD. Matthew says he spent most of his life not believing in God. He became a doctor working in a hospital’s emergency department and becoming the Chief of Hospital Medical Staff. One night, his wife asked him a question “What do you think is the

biggest problem on the earth?" He told her "The world is dying." Then she asked him "if the world is dying, what are you going to do about it?"

Shortly after this conversation, of which he had no answers, they experienced many significant life challenges which he says showed him that evil exists in the world. His belief in science was failing him. He read a variety of sacred texts until he came across a Bible on a table at the hospital. And he stole it!! Much like many of the authors of hymns I talk about, he took trauma in his life and turned to God.

One thing led to another, and he and his family came to believe in Jesus as their saviour. And Nancy's question was answered. He was going to serve God and help save the planet. He was intrigued by the trees of the Bible.

He says that every significant theological event in the Bible is marked by a tree – the fall, the flood, the overthrow of Pharaoh – every major event in the Bible has a tree, branch, fruit, seed or some part of a tree marking a spot.

He also says that every major character in the Bible appears in conjunction with a tree such as Noah building the arc and then receiving the olive leaf (Genesis 8:11), Abraham sat under "the oaks of Mamre" (18:1) and Moses stood barefoot in front of the burning bush (Exodus 3:2-5).

He says although Joseph may appear to be an exception, the Bible tells us he is a tree "Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine near a spring, whose branches climb over a wall"– (Genesis 49:22).

So it isn't as clear cut – if you will excuse the pun - it isn't specifically a tree but the analogy of a tree and the parts of a tree we need to be open to as we explore this part of the Bible.

Matthew Sleeth has a quote that particularly struck me. "Without humans, trees would manage just fine. Without trees, people would perish." Isn't that quite the thought. Matthew points out his belief in God's plan - when God created Adam then created the trees which, science tells us, keep us alive. He points out that a cast of the tubes leading into a human lung is indistinguishable from the shape of a bare oak tree.

Another Bible passage we could examine is Mathew 13 verses 31-32 which has parallel Bible passages in Mark chapter 4 verses 30-32 and Luke chapter 13 verses 18-19. This passage is one we have heard many times before.

“The Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches. Jesus declares the kingdom of heaven is like a tree. Jesus taught that although the kingdom of heaven doesn’t appear very large, it will grow and overtake the world. God’s word though small in appearance, has incredible transformative power. Great things can come from humble beginnings.

The little round mustard seed transforms into an astonishing tree with roots, a trunk, limbs and branches. How could something so small and unremarkable become something so different and vast. The kingdom of heaven is like that too. It could also be compared to small, quiet acts of love done in the name of Jesus. Acts not done for glory or attention but ‘just because’ could be compared to mustard seeds that become larger.

Calvin Church is strong in promoting and modeling these acts of love and we know the potential of these to spread out and have a greater eternal impact. Our acts of love are given to everyone regardless of circumstances.

Could the mustard seed parable also be compared to the Kingdom of heaven starting small with Jesus’ teaching and building the Kingdom of God with his disciples with it having the potential to grow and spread across the world, providing shelter to those in need. When we struggle with our faith, if we can hold on to a mustard seed size of faith, we can grow again in God.

Now let’s think of Zacchaeus in Luke 19 climbing the sycamore tree to see Jesus because he could not see over the crowd. Instead of giving up and going home as some of us might have, he climbed a tree where Jesus found him, beseeched him to come down and explained he was going to stay at his house. This caused great concern to the crowd as Jesus went to be the guest of a sinner, a chief tax collector for the Roman government who was said to collect more than he should thus making him a wealthy man. Zacchaeus was an undesirable, yet the parable is a reminder to us to take Christ’s message to those who may be considered the undesirable of our society. Zacchaeus, when he met Jesus, promised to change his ways.

I drew a parallel between this story and the one I gave a while ago about the song The Same Love. If you were here, part of the message was how often we miss

God calling to us even when it is right in front of our faces. Zacchaeus could have walked away or remained hidden behind others in the crowd, but he made an extra effort to see Jesus so not only was he successful, Jesus saw him and called to him.

Following Jesus is life changing. How many of us would have worked so hard to see Jesus at a time in our lives when we were living in a less-than-ideal situation and the effort was so much. Would we have seen the crowd as a barrier, would we have stayed back, would we have given up and gone home?

How many of us climbed trees as children? We weren't necessarily looking for Jesus – maybe we were conquering fears, exploring a world we couldn't see from the ground, creating stories in our minds, trying to hide on siblings or just having fun. Or did you ever just sit under a tree thinking, reading or just relaxing?

It is said the only thing Jesus harmed is a tree – Mark chapter 11 verses 12-14 and 20-21. This was in the second reading. Jesus was hungry when he left Bethany and approached a fig tree looking for fruit. He found only leaves as it was not the season for figs. Jesus told the tree "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." They went to the temple in Jerusalem where you will remember he cleared out the temple. When they left the city, they saw the fig tree withered from its roots.

Peter pointed this out to Jesus who reminded them "Have faith in God", "Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea', and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. 24 Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. 25 And when you stand praying if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

There are other references to fig trees in the Bible, such as Matthew Chapter 24 verses 32 to 35.

32 "Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. 33 Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. 34 Truly I tell you; this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. 35 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away."

Jesus instructs us to learn from the fig tree. When the leaves appear, people will know summer is coming. Parallel this to humans, when mankind sees predicted signs, we will know Christ's return is near. The blooming leaves actually represent events that will occur.

Although it is not a tree, Moses staff holds a place of importance in many stories in Exodus. Made of wood, Moses uses it as a walking stick. However, the following events highlighting the walking stick and its connection to God occur in various parts of Exodus:

-(4:2 to 5), God gives Moses the miraculous sign of his staff turning into a snake and back to a staff to give Moses the confidence to take God's message to Pharaoh. Moses was worried that he would not be believed.

-(7:8 to 13), God instructs Moses to turn Aaron's staff into a snake when Pharaoh demands a miracle. They follow through, so Pharaoh summons the wise men, sorcerers and Egyptian magicians who did the same thing with their staffs only to have Aarons' staff swallow their staffs. This showed the God of Israel was greater than the power of Egypt's gods however Pharaoh was unmoved.

-(7:14 to 24) God gives Moses the ability to take his staff in his hand, spread it over the Nile to turn the water into blood rendering uninhabitable for the fish, making it smell and making it unable to be used for drinking. This was another one of the plagues God commanded Moses place against Egypt to continue to show the Lord is God above all gods and humans. Again, Pharaoh was unmoved.

-(14: 21 to 23) Moses, at God's command, uses his staff to part the Red Sea to help the Israelites escape the Egyptians.

-(17:5 to 7), God helps Moses use his staff to strike a rock to get water for the Israelites to drink on their journey when they began to lose faith in God.

-(17:8 to 13) When Joshua was leading a fight against the Amalekites, as long as Moses held what he called "the staff of God" up in the air, the Israelites would win. When Moses grew tired, Aaron and Hur held his hands up so Joshua would successfully win the war.

I have read this part of the Bible many times before but have never made the connection as to how many times Moses used his staff to show God's power.

We all remember Job's story. Job speaks in Chapter 14 verses 7 to 9 "For there is hope for a tree, if it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its new shoots will not fail. Its roots may grow old in the ground and its stump die in the soil, yet at the scent of water it will bud and put forth shoots like a plant." (NIV)

At one point, Job (chapter 19 verse 10) cries out in reference to God, "He tears me down on every side till I am gone; he uproots my hope like a tree." I imagine many of us have had that experience during a tough time, that our hope has been uprooted like a tree after a terrible windstorm. But remember, you need a mustard seed size of faith to rebuild.

Jesus' life begins in a manger, he is a carpenter, they dug a crown of thorns into his head, he is crucified on a cross. Many of his parables or teachings have trees or parts of trees as part of the lesson.

When Jesus teaches us about not judging others, one of his statements is in Matthew chapter 7 verses 3 to 5 "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

Remember Psalm 1? Jeremiah 17 verses 7 to 8 says "But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit." Does that sound somewhat familiar? Translated this tells us if we trust in the Lord we will be blessed and rewarded with eternal benefits. We won't have to worry in any situation because the roots of our lives go deep into God.

Remember the trees in the Garden of Eden? In Revelation, the final book of the Bible, chapter 22, reference is made to the angel showing the author a river of the water of life. Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse.

An interpretation of this can be that the tree refers to the eternal life given to all of God's people. The healing leaves indicate the absence of anything that brings physical or spiritual harm. As this passage goes further, we are assured we will see God's face. 22:4. Isn't that God's highest plan, for us to be restored to a personal relationship with him and for him to live with us forever.

If we go back to our responsive Psalm, we read about Man being like a tree planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. Those who faithfully pursue a deeper relationship with and a better understanding of God's Word will find guidance in the Holy Spirit. No matter what we experience, or how far we become removed from God, with our roots planted deep in our faith in God, we will know God's purposes, experiences his presence and receive his peace.

The only thing that could kill Jesus was a tree – On a new earth, God's people will live with Jesus who redeemed us by his death on a cross. The cross is our doorway to eternal life. Jesus died on a cross made of wood for our sins and isn't it interesting that when we die, many of us will find our final resting place in a vessel made of wood.

Jesus last 'I am' statement is in Revelation 22:16 is "I am the Root and the descendent of David and I am the bright Morning Star". There is the word root, connected again to the image of the tree.

Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like a tree in Matthew 13:31-32.

So in the end, what was the message God asked me to give? Was it about Faith or Trees? I will leave it up to you to decide.

Please join me in prayer.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for faith and for trees. We pray that we would leave here with a thirst for more, to study your message and to expand our knowledge of your love for us. We ask you to be with us as we explore your word and your world. We ask this in the precious name of Jesus. Amen.