

November 28, 2021, Advent 1  
South Congregational Church in Glastonbury  
Jeremiah 33:14-16

“Old Growth/New Growth”

*‘Watch for this: The time is coming’—God’s Decree—‘when I will keep the promise I made to the families of Israel and Judah. When that time comes, I will make a fresh and true shoot sprout from the David-Tree. He will run this country honestly and fairly. He will set things right. That’s when Judah will be secure and Jerusalem will live in safety. The motto for the city will be, “God Has Set Things Right for Us.” --*  
The Message translation, adapted

*Prayer: O God of all the prophets, you announced the coming of Jesus our Christ by wondrous signs in the heavens and on the earth. Guard our hearts from despair so that we too, in the company of the faithful in all generations, and by the power of your Holy Spirit, may be found ready to raise our heads at the dawn of redeeming grace -- the day of Jesus Christ, today and for eternity. Amen*

One of the things I remember from my childhood has to do with the size of the trees. I remember sitting in the back of my parent’s Volkswagen and seeing the logging trucks in Oregon heading out of the mountains and taking their loads to the lumber mills. When I was very little it was not unusual to see a full size tractor trailer carrying one log to the lumber yard. The one log could be 20 or more feet in diameter; that’s a tree that would have been 300 – 400 years old. Today we call that old growth timber, we didn’t call it old growth then – we just called it timber. Today what you see is a tractor trailer with dozens of trees piled high, not one of them more than 12 inches in diameter. People complain that wood isn’t as good as it used to be -- there are several reasons, the climate they are growing in now has changed, we cut our trees down earlier for lumber, they tend to grow in the company of a forest of trees of the same age, where timber is cut now there just are not as many old growth trees, hardly any, actually.

You might have had cause once to stop and look at the rings in the stump of a tree. You might count the rings back from the outermost ring to the year of your birth, you can see thin rings when there were droughts you can see wide rings when there was a rainy summer (the way a tree records history is different from the way we record important events), on the biggest and oldest of trees in

the redwood forests you can count back 2000 rings to the year when Jesus was born, and farther back. In Eastern Oregon they can date the years of volcano eruptions by what is recorded in the rings of the trees for hundreds of square miles. When you know what you are looking for, you can sometimes see the volcanic ash in there, a dark smoky ring, recorded literally in living history. And sometimes these old trees will send up a shoot, even when the tree is no longer viable. After the loggers have come through and after the lawsuits about the spotted owls, squabbles with the environmental activists, and the Bureau of Land Management, after it is all said and done and everyone has moved on, I tell you this because I've seen it, you can go out and look at those stumps and there on the side, close to the ground, is a shoot, and you can't call that tree entirely dead anymore. And you can't say it's the end of the forest where they've clear-cut it. Everything is over, but nothing is over, something else is just starting... something is growing!

The prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah both lean into this metaphor hard "I will make a fresh and true shoot sprout from the David-Tree." And if you have been reading the Bible you will know that this is just the kind of thing that scripture promises. These are the Bible's perennial themes: a river in the desert, fertility to the infertile, hope for those who have given up on hope, wealth for the poor, a legacy of faith when it seems faith died with a previous generation.

John the Baptist who you'll be hearing from later in Advent grew up with this. John was born to a priestly couple in their old age – he knew they were no longer hopeful for a child, yet they were delighted when he was born. And like that tree stump, John's influence reached long beyond his death – when he was executed in prison by Herod. People are still influenced by him, long after his voice fell silent.

It echoes to this very day. Will you prepare a way? Will you make a way in the desert places of your heart? Have you noticed the tender slim shoot coming up from the side of the stump which has been cut down? Is there room in your heart, in your home, in your schedule, and in your head, for that kind of radical appearance? Will you prepare a way? How will you lean into hope?

In every forest there is old growth and there is new growth. They depend on each other, the old creates seeds, partial shade, fixes the soil to support more of its kind, making way for the new, with the fallen leaves or pine needles preparing the soil for the future, the new grows in the environment provided by the old. The strongest forests are those with trees of all ages and in stages of decay and growth. Those habitats support great diversity of species.

In the days of Jeremiah (who was active from the years 626 BCE to at least 587 after the fall of the first Temple) the cedars of Lebanon had already been cut down at least once, for the building of Solomon's Temple, and . A vast deforestation which has affected the terrain and the climate ever since. The New York Times covered the Cedars of Lebanon recently, saying: "Through five millennia of recorded history, a parade of civilizations has praised the cedars of Lebanon — and then chopped them down. Lebanon has been deforested by Mesopotamians, Phoenicians and ancient Egyptians; by the Greek and Roman empires; by crusaders, colonizers and modern Middle East turmoil. Yet the trees are so symbolic of the country that a cedar stands at the center of the Lebanese flag.

One of the meta questions for our era is how we as citizens of one world, move from business models that encourage unsustainable growth, and concentrations of power, to one of sustainability and mutual accountability. The World Health Organization today is thinking about the pandemic globally, we recognize that in a global economy that as long as the virus is alive anywhere in the world it remains a threat to future generations everywhere. It is foolish to think that the health of those in other countries does not affect us because it already has, and it does. It is hopeful that so many good minds are thinking about this problem from many angles.

Thinking about the rings on the tree stump today, I'm also thinking about South Church. About your years of ministry in this community and the new growth from here. One of the things I like about this church is that you have been engaging in significant ministry as a congregation together here for quite awhile. Using this forest metaphor, you'll see that that sets up future generations with a good environment for the next phases of growth.

Meister Eckhart who lived from 1260 to 1329 said that one of the highest and loftiest things that one can let go of is to let go of God for the sake of God. "I pray to God, to rid me of God. God's exit is God's entrance." He means that when we let go of the preconceptions and prejudices we have about God, who God is, what God is in the world, our relationship to God, we prepare a way for a truer understanding and experience of God.

Everyone: *'Watch for this: The time is coming'—God's Decree—'when I will keep the promise I made to the families of Israel and Judah. When that time comes, I will make a fresh and true shoot sprout from the David-Tree. He will run this country honestly and fairly. He will set things right. That's when Judah will be secure and*

*Jerusalem live in safety. The motto for the city will be, "God Has Set Things Right for Us."*

These weeks before Christmas are full of preparations...And the preparation rituals themselves are loaded with memories of other years and other preparations. This week you might have out some decorations the ones left from years past and maybe some new ones too, we're going to make Christmas cookies (an aroma from the kitchen that only comes once a year), we're getting packages in the mail, you might have some special foods you like to make at this time of year. It is too easy in these weeks to be full of the unimportant. And yet we are preparing, all of us, we are preparing...

If you stop and look around, see what is growing all around you. Each day I come to work here, I admire that enormous tree in front of the church building. It bears the marks of careful arborists in years past, it is also clearly one of the oldest witnesses to life in this community. Creating a certain micro climate here as we enter with the church facing Main Street. What are you permitting this year, to grow; whose growth are you sheltering, what is being cut back so that new life can emerge?

Amid the preparations will you also prepare for God?

When you look back over the rings in the stump of that tree, will it be a year of faith and hope and good works? I'd like to encourage you that while you are preparing, you also prepare for the peaceable kingdom, the one that is coming, always ahead. Here in South Glastonbury, and in the whole world.

*Questions for reflection and conversation:*

- *What signs of hope have you noticed this season?*
- *Do you prefer to focus on old growth or new growth? Why?*