

**“Verdant Praise”**  
Sixth Sunday of Easter  
1 Chronicles 16:7-36  
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Saint Paul, Minnesota

David is bringing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, and the people gather to celebrate and to worship. David appoints people to their various leadership roles (Almost like a well-organized Presbyterian). He appoints Levites and priests to lead the worship. He appoints musicians—instrumentalists, choir, choirmaster, and song writers. (Demonstrating the biblical origins of our modern-day music ministry.)

This grand celebration is capped by singing a collection of psalms that together celebrate all that God has done to save the people and to look ahead in hope. With all nature joining in praising God.

Steven Tuell, in his commentary, writes that this song contains the key theme of the entire book of Chronicles. And that theme is “Because God is the righteous judge and ruler of the world, the reader is assured that God will respond with blessing to those who are faithful.” But he also says that the psalm, and the entire chronicle, contains a further word of warning—“because of God’s justice, unfaithfulness and disobedience will result in destruction.”

As is so often the case in the Biblical stories, we are presented with two ways of living. One that embraces God’s way and results in abundance and flourishing. And one that rejects the path of God and ends in misery and destruction.

So this collection of psalms, sung at this important moment in the worship life of the people of Jerusalem, is a reminder of the core ethical choices presented to them if they are to be faithful followers of God.

And one of the fascinating features of this psalm is that nature itself is called to bear witness and to respond to the people’s faithfulness to God’s covenant. Steven Tuell points this out. He writes, “Human justice and injustice have consequences for the natural world. Through waste and pollution of our natural resources, human decisions can threaten the future of life on this planet. Little wonder that the establishment of God’s just order should be applauded by ocean, field, and forest!”

At this celebratory moment in the life of the people, when they are being reminded of their ethical responsibilities, the people are also reminded that what they do matters not just for them and their human community; it also matters for all of nature that surrounds them. Therefore, they have moral responsibilities for the land, animals, trees, and waters. To be faithful followers of God’s covenant, to follow the path of abundance and flourishing, they must also be concerned with the well-being of everything else that shares this planet with us. For the people of God, this is the way, to live in harmony and care for all the Earth.

In his book *Speak to the Earth and It will Teach You*, Wisconsin pastor Daniel Cooperrider wants to draw our attention to the ways in which God speaks to us through nature. How we hear the word of God in rivers, mountains, trees, clouds, and all of the world that surrounds us. And what we learn by attending to the natural world.

In one of his chapters on trees, Cooperrider considers the story from Genesis where Eve and Adam eat from the tree of knowledge, which God has forbidden them to do. A story weighted with much theological and cultural baggage, but which Cooperrider invites us to approach in a new way by focusing on the tree itself.

He points out that earlier in Genesis, when trees were first created, the text says, “Out of the ground God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.” He ponders whether that order is significant. That trees might be of some use is mentioned second. What is mentioned first is that they are beautiful. Cooperrider declares, “The first thing God says about trees is that they were made to be pleasant to the sight—that they were made simply to be beautiful and for us to admire and appreciate them for their beauty.”

From this, Cooperrider surmises, that God wants us first *to see* trees. To see them as beautiful. To pay attention to that and to admire it and learn from it. And only once we have done that, then we can eat from the tree, make some beneficial use of it.

Cooperrider concludes that this might be a reason God forbade Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. He writes, “And then it’s as if God gave us a little test to see if we got the point. God said you can eat from all of the trees but this one. In other words, you’ll have plenty to eat, more than enough. But if eating—if consuming—is the only way you know how to relate to things, then you are taking a fateful step in the wrong direction.”

This, I believe, is a beautiful insight, rooted in the scriptural story. God has provided for us in the abundance of nature, but if we place our use and consumption first, then we’ve made a serious mistake. What must come first is appreciation of all that natural beauty. Of attending to it and learning from it. Only then will we make proper use of it, finding harmony and balance. Only then will we appreciate how interconnected all things are. Only then will we truly become the people whom God intends for us to be.

Since the beginning of Lent, trees have been a tool in our worship life, most directly in the conversations with the children. We’ve been using this beautiful tree here beneath the pulpit to illustrate spiritual lessons. This tree has grown and bloomed and provided sustenance to other creatures. Hopefully it has guided our imaginations and aided in our worship.

And this Easter season I’ve been drawing lessons from nature—about God and our humanity and how we are supposed to live and care for each other.

We do have much to learn from nature, especially from trees. I imagine most of you have favorite trees? Trees that have been important to you? Deep memories of trees from childhood. I think of the tree on my grandparents’ farm that I loved to climb. Or the catalpa tree we always sat under in the summer heat as we turned the hand crank to make homemade ice cream for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebrations. That was also the tree that had the tire swing hanging from it.

These last couple of weeks the flowering trees have been a delight. Yesterday, our family went to the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum for the tulip festival. Also in full bloom were the crabapple trees, and the arboretum has a whole hilltop covered in those trees. As we drove through the area was filled with people taking pictures and families having picnics. These lovely trees call for us to slow down and take the time to really notice and appreciate them.

When I visited the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives back in 1994, our guide pointed out one olive tree that is more than 2,000 years old, which means that tree was standing there the night that Jesus came to pray before he was arrested and crucified. I was blown away by that idea. Maybe Jesus himself had sat under this very tree that I was now standing under?

But 2000 years doesn’t come close to being truly ancient, when it comes to trees.

In Iran there grows a cypress that was two centuries old when Abram and Sara were journeying across Middle East. Imagine that. The Cypress of Abarkuh is around 4,000 years old. Legend says it was planted by Zoroaster himself. I did a Google search to see if there was any news about this tree and how it has fared during the war. I couldn’t find any news, which I take to be a good thing.

In the White Mountains of California, a bristlecone pine named Methusaleh is 4,850 years old. That tree has lived through all of human recorded history.

In Finland there is a Norway Spruce, known as Old Tjikko, that is 9,500 years old. Likely the oldest individual tree on the Earth. At least that we know of. Who knows what ancient trees might be living deep in some forest.

But the oldest tree, and most likely the oldest living organism upon the planet, is Pando, In Utah, you will discover what appears to be a forest of 47,000 quaking Aspens. But, what looks like a forest is, in fact, one organism that spreads across 106 acres and is likely also the most massive living thing on the earth at 6,000 metric tons. Though some once speculated that Pando was 80,000 years old, the latest scientific

research suggests it is at most 16,000 years old, which is the last time glaciers covered that portion of Utah. Though considered unlikely, it is possible that the root system lived before the last ice age and survived it.

These ancient creatures deserve not only our attention and appreciation, but our respect and our care. They are beloved children of God.

Daniel Cooperrider speculates on these ancient trees and what we might learn from them. Maybe the first question to ask is how do they live so long? And the answer to that seems to be “how profoundly socially interconnected trees are.”

As I mentioned last week, we’ve learned so much in recent years about how deeply interconnected trees are with each other, the soil, and the fungi in the ground. Trees send signals to each other through the root and fungi network. When one is damaged or sick, other trees will send nutrients to care for the tree. There is evidence that in forests the nutrition is shared among trees so that all benefit, not just those in the richest soil. Cooperrider concludes, “The forest, it seems, creates its own social safety net, privileging the wellbeing of the whole over the self-interest of the one. This is the essence of forest wisdom.”

And that is the most important lesson we humans can learn from trees when we take the time to appreciate them. For life to flourish, we must care for one another, care for the wellbeing of the whole, not just ourselves.

The religious scholar Karen Armstrong has been exploring the world’s religions for decades now and has written a series of bestselling books. From her we’ve learned much about the common themes and practices that we share across religions and cultures. One of her more recent books was entitled *Sacred Nature: How We Can Recover Our Bond with the Natural World*. One of the religious traditions she draws deeply upon in this book is Confucianism.

Confucius taught that human society needs to conform to the rhythms of nature. Armstrong writes, “Only if human beings form a deep partnership, a trinity, with heaven and earth, and treat all the ‘myriad things’ as we would wish to be treated ourselves, will we [achieve the highest virtue].”

Confucius is one of the earliest thinkers to have taught a version of the Golden Rule, to treat others as we would like to be treated. And Confucius included more than humanity in that lesson. We should treat all of creation, even heaven and earth, as we would like to be treated. If we want dignity, respect, compassion, and care for ourselves, then we should treat all people and all of nature the same way.

This is one of the most ancient of human ethical visions. And we find aspects of this teaching across the world in various religious traditions. Yet it remains something we only aspire to. Humanity continues to fall short of our best and highest ideals.

Armstrong also writes about a later Confucian teaching that invites us to see the world as series of concentric circles, beginning with the people and things that are closest to us, and then expanding our vision ever outward. Confucian schools used this model to teach young people first about obligations to family, then to the wider community, to the nation, and to the whole world. She writes, “The object is to extend the mind from what is ‘near at hand,’ breaking down barriers of egotism and habits of self-regard, to realise our profound connection with, and indeed, our dependence upon all our fellow creates and the natural world.”

Armstrong advises that we make this type of contemplation a daily routine. Spend fifteen minutes contemplating this series of concentric circles—when we are walking the dog or doing the dishes or driving to work or some other mundane activity.

She advises us to start by considering our immediate environment, noting the trees, flowers, birdsong, clouds, etc. And to see them not just as backdrops for our lives but as the true marvels they are. She says we must recognize their holiness. To see them as something other than resources. Which, of course, is the exact same point Daniel Cooperrider took from the Genesis story.

Karen Armstrong advises that from the contemplation of our immediate surroundings, we should then expand our contemplation to all the concentric circles, until we are appreciating the beauty and the wonder of the entire world. This spiritual practice, she writes, will “develop new habits of mind and heart.”

I couldn't help but see the similarities with the nature spiritualities in the Judeo-Christian traditions. So, take this contemplative exercise as your homework this week.

Here in First Chronicles, at this incredible moment of national celebration and the organization of a new worshipping life, the people are reminded of their obligations not just to each other, but to all of creation. That nature itself responds to actions of human beings. And when we choose to follow in the way of God, to observe the covenant, then creation rejoices. Creation joins in our worship of God.

To follow God's way is to see nature as holy and sacred. To follow God's way is to live a life of respect, compassion, and care towards all God's children, not just the human ones. To choose a life of well-being is to recognize how deeply interconnected we all are, and to seek the harmony and balance of a virtuous life. To worship God is to join in praise with the birds and the tulips and the crabapple trees.

Save us, O God. Rescue us from the path of destruction. Help us to choose life for all the Earth. That together with all your beloved children we might join in praise and thanksgiving. For God is good. God's steadfast love endures forever.