

“Sylvan Strength”

Sixth Sunday of Easter/Confirmation Sunday

Ezekiel 17:22-24

May 3, 2026

Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones

The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

Saint Paul, Minnesota

“Can the whole forest be seen through a small contemplative window of leaves, rocks, and water?” so asks biologist David George Haskell at the beginning of his wonderful book *The Forest Unseen: A Year’s Watch in Nature*.

Haskell, who lives in southeastern Tennessee, decided to randomly pick a one-meter circle in the middle of the forest and study that spot for one year. According to him, picking the spot occurred by just walking upslope through the forest till he found a comfortable rock to sit on. And then selecting the area in front of that rock as the place to contemplate.

The book is a series of observations through all the seasons of the year as that small patch of forest changes and the various forms of life that occupy it. Sometimes Haskell will be down on hands and knees with a lens looking at the microscopic world under the leaf matter. Sometimes he watches a snail make its way across the space. Others he sits and observes the trees and the birds flying by.

It’s a rather remarkable book, equal parts biology and spiritual contemplation. One year I chose to read it similarly to a daily devotional.

In one of the entries from December, when the ground is covered with leaf matter, he gets down to study the soil, in particular the fungi. He remarks on our growing scientific understanding of how tree roots and fungi are deeply connected to one another. And that the fungi become a network connecting all the trees of the forest, sending signals from one tree to another. Such that we are beginning to understand forests almost as a organism.

At the conclusion of that day’s entry, he writes,

My peephole into the soil gave me a glimpse into some new ways of thinking about evolution and ecology. Or are they so new? Perhaps soil scientists are rediscovering and extending what our culture already knows and has embedded into our language. The more we learn about the life of the soil, the more apt our language’s symbols become: “roots,” “groundedness.” These words reflect not only a physical connection to place but reciprocity with the environment, mutual dependence with other members of the community, and the positive effects of roots on the rest of their home. All these relationships are embedded in a history so deep that individuality has started to dissolve and uprootedness is impossible.

Recent biology is teaching us important truths about the ground and how all life is deeply intertwined. The flourishing and strength of trees is not just an individual achievement, but the result of an entire network providing nurture, support, protection, and care.

A fitting image for Confirmation Sunday, I believe.

A day in which we celebrate and honor these young people and acknowledge the ways they are rooted in this place, in this community, as part of our faith in God, our love for each other, and our hopes for the future.

The great Medieval mystic Meister Eckhart understood the spiritual importance of the earth around us and beneath us. “Ground,” or “*grunt*” in the German, was a significant concept for Eckhart.

The Eckhart scholar Bernard McGinn points out that in Middle High German, *grunt* had four layers of meaning. First is the physical ground, the earth, the soil. That in which we get our hands dirty.

Second, *grunt* can mean the bottom or lowest side of something.

A third meaning begins to grow more abstract. The “ground” can be the origin or source of a thing. That from which it springs, is born.

And, finally, “ground” can mean “what is inmost, hidden, most proper to a being, that is, its essence.”

So, *grunt*, “ground,” is a rather rich image in Middle High German. And, I think, remains so in English, where do we do talk about being “grounded” and “rooted” and we do not picture ourselves literally planted in some soil in the backyard.

Drawing on this rich image, Eckhart preached that we should ground ourselves in God. That God is our ground, from which we draw our nourishment and strength.

And further, that our spiritual growth is a matter of being grounded as an activity. Of going deep into our innermost self, the place of pure possibility, and finding God there.

Eckhart proclaimed, “Go into your own ground and there act, and the works that you do there will all be living.”

My mother and I both love trees. We realized when we moved into together last summer that we both had quite a few artworks that picture trees. Many of those we assembled together in our family room, giving it a good north woods feel.

One painting of mine hanging there, which used to hang in my church office in Omaha, is of the bottom of the trees, particularly of the roots, as they burrow into the dirt and the rocks.

I purposely bought that painting, from a dear friend, because of my love of Meister Eckhart’s theology of the ground, which I thought the painting so beautifully signified.

In this beautiful poem from Ezekiel that I read today, the prophet imagines God taking the seedling and planting in on the mountainside and nurturing it until it becomes a mighty tree. A tree so strong and flourishing that other creatures and plants find it to be a safe and supportive home for their own lives.

In our faith formation of one another, and particularly of our young people, we hope to cultivate strong and resilient people, who can faithfully persevere through all the trials of life.

We hope to cultivate people who, in their lives, bear rich fruit. Fruit that cares for and serves other people and the wider world.

And, given what we know about trees and their deep interconnections with the rest of the forest, our strength and growth is not simply an individual achievement, but is a collective effort of nurture and support.

Yesterday morning elders of the church met with the confirmands to discuss their statements of faith. And to discuss faith more broadly. It was a rather beautiful and meaningful moment, I thought. As the elders shared about how faith and spirituality have been resources for them as they’ve journeyed through life. And as the youth shared how faith has already shaped them.

I talked about how faith and spirituality are like a sport. They need to be practiced and learned. And coaches are helpful. Also, that you need to be actively practicing it in order to draw the benefits from it.

At the conclusion of that conversation, we gathered in the Elizabeth Chapel with their parents and confirmation mentors, worshiped together, and the confirmands signed the big membership book. The current volume goes back to 1947. Some of the adults looked themselves up in the book.

All of it a rich reminder of what it means to be rooted and grounded in a community, in a place, in God.

We hope that because of the skills acquired here, the values modeled, the virtues habituated, and the relationships formed, that the people from this community will flourish, leading lives of wonder, joy, and delight.

Together let us nurture and support one another, as we strive for justice and peace in all the earth, in the name of Jesus Christ.