

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta
“The Tree of God’s Grace” (Psalm 1:1-3)
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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

When I was young I used to love climbing trees, and would spend hours just hanging out in the branches. There was a maple tree in our front yard, and during the late spring if you climbed this tree and shook the branches, hundreds of winged seeds (samaras—aka whirligigs, helicopters) would spin and slowly descend to the ground. It was amazing. In the fall the colors of the leaves were breathtaking. During the winter I could not wait to see the samaras again—and without fail they always came back in the spring. When our kids were young we lived in the South Carolina Low Country, and Steph and I often took them to John’s Island to see visit the famous Angel Oak, a live oak tree over 400 hundred years old, nearly 70 feet tall, with a trunk nearly 30 feet in circumference. Our kids delighted in playing tag among its countless branches. We felt like we were in a fairy tale.

Several years ago my daughter Emily and I went on a road trip to various national parks out west. After crossing the Utah desert we drove into Nevada and visited Great Basin National Park, where some of the oldest trees in the world live, bristlecone pines over 4,000 years old. Bristlecone pines thrive in an extreme environment with extreme temperatures and extreme winds. Standing near one of these ancient trees is very humbling. Later we visited Redwood National Park in California, where we saw the giant red woods, the tallest trees in the world, some of which are 300 feet tall—or as tall as a football field is long—mind blowing.

You may wonder where I am going with all this...today I am preaching on the first three verses of Psalm 1:

Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seats of the scornful! Their delight is in the law of the Lord, and they meditate on his law day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither (Psalm 1:1-3, *The Book of Common Prayer* 585).

“Trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season”...trees play a recurring role in scripture, going all the way back to the Garden of Eden where God commanded Adam and Eve, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Genesis 2:16-17). Well, you know what happened. Centuries later, it was under an oak tree when the Lord appeared to Abraham and promised that he and Sarah would have a son even though they were way too old for that to happen naturally (Genesis 18:1-15)—and they did.

When the prophet Elijah fled from the evil queen Jezebel for fear of his life, he was so discouraged he called out to God, “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” Under a tree in the wilderness Elijah fell asleep from exhaustion, thinking it was the end. But it was not the end, for that was when an angel of the Lord visited him and provided food and water that strengthened him for 40 days as he journeyed to Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:4-8).

“Trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season”...in his Sermon on the Mount Jesus warned of false prophets, “You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit” (Matthew 7:15-17).

Going back to Psalm 1...“Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seats of the scornful”—do you know anyone who has never done those things? How about you? The truth is human beings often do the exact opposite—they do walk in the counsel of the wicked and do linger in the way of sinners and do sit in the seats of the scornful—especially via social media. “Their delight is in the law of the Lord,” the psalmist writes, “and they meditate on his law day and night”...again, do you know anyone who does that? What do you meditate on day and night? If all of this is required to become “like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season” and yet no one does any of this, what do we do with Psalm 1?

“Trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season”...Psalm 1 points to the most important tree ever, the cross, where Jesus Christ died for the world, and for you—and to bear the “good fruit” of forgiveness and eternal life. In his passion and death Jesus was victimized by “the counsel of the wicked” and

condemned by those who “sat in the seats of the scornful.” And as Jesus carried his cross to Calvary he “lingered in the way of sinners” even though he had never sinned, and he lingered on the cross between sinners until he drew his final breath.

This is why Peter preached, “The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree” (Acts 5:30)—and this is why Paul wrote, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’” (Galatians 3:13).

One of my favorite books is *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein, a classic that takes on even more meaning when connected to these trees in scripture:

Once there was a tree...and she loved a little boy. And every day the boy would come and he would gather her leaves and make them into crowns and play king of the forest. He would climb up her trunk and swing from her branches and eat apples. And they would play hide-and-go-seek. And when he was tired he would sleep in her shade. And the boy loved the tree...very much. And the tree was happy. But time went by. And the boy grew older. And the tree was often alone.

Then one day the boy came to the tree and the tree said, “Come, Boy, come and climb up my trunk and swing from my branches and eat apples and play in my shade and be happy.” “I am too big to climb and play,” said the boy. “I want to buy things and have fun. I want some money. Can you give me some money?” “I’m sorry,” said the tree, “but I have no money. I have only leaves and apples. Take my apples, Boy, and sell them in the city. Then you will have money and you will be happy.” And so the boy climbed up the tree and gathered her apples and carried them away. And the tree was happy.

But the boy stayed away for a long time...and the tree was sad. And then one day the boy came back and the tree shook with joy and she said, “Come, Boy, climb up my trunk and swing from my branches and be happy.”

“I am too busy to climb trees,” said the boy. “I want a house to keep me warm,” he said. “I want a wife and I want children, and so I need a house. Can you give me a house?” “I have no house,” said the tree. “The forest is

my house, but you may cut off my branches and build a house. Then you will be happy.” And so the boy cut off her branches and carried them away to build his house. And the tree was happy.

But the boy stayed away for a long time. And when he came back, the tree was so happy she could hardly speak. “Come, Boy,” she whispered, “come and play.” “I am too old and sad to play,” said the boy. “I want a boat that will take me far away from here. Come you give me a boat?” “Cut down my trunk and make a boat,” said the tree. “Then you can sail away... and be happy.” And so the boy cut down her trunk and made a boat and sailed away. And the tree was happy...but not really.

And after a long time the boy came back again. “I am sorry, Boy,” said the tree, “but I have nothing left to give you—my apples are gone.” “My teeth are too weak for apples,” said the boy. “My trunk is gone,” said the tree. “You cannot climb...” “I am too tired to climb,” said the boy. “I am sorry,” sighed the tree. “I wish that I could give you something...but I have nothing left. I am just an old stump. I am sorry...” “I don’t need very much now,” said the boy, “just a quiet place to sit and rest. I am very tired.” “Well,” said the tree, straightening herself up as much as she could, “well, an old stump is good for sitting and resting. Come, Boy, sit down. Sit down and rest.” And the boy did. And the tree was happy.

The ultimate “giving tree” of course is the cross—where Jesus gave his life in order to give you life. Jesus gave every leaf, every apple, every branch, everything for you. And the cross in turn points to one last tree...for in the last chapter of the Bible John describes the “tree of life”:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life, with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:1-2).

In other words, the good news of the gospel is that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil has been replaced by the tree of God’s grace—which bears the fruit of God’s forgiveness in the seasons in your life when you need it most (which

might be right now)—and will bear the fruit of eternal life when you draw your final breath. And throughout eternity, the “tree of life” will grow in the new heaven and the new earth “for the healing of the nations” and for the healing of every wound, every heartbreak, every tragedy, every failure, every shattering experience of your life.

The tree of God’s grace is even more expansive than the Angel Oak—for the love of God is immeasurable and lasts forever.

The tree of God’s grace is even more enduring than the bristlecone pine trees and thrives in the most extreme environments in your life.

The tree of God’s grace is even higher than the giant red woods because as the psalmist proclaims, “Your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens, and your faithfulness to the clouds” (Psalm 36:5).

When you are as barren as Abraham and Sarah, or as exhausted and discouraged as Elijah—that is when the tree of God’s grace will bear fruit in due season...and when your life is shaken to the foundations, you will find that countless winged seeds of God’s grace will gently spin and descend to bring you new hope and new life.

Amen.