



February 13, 2022: The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

*Jesus the Tree*

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Oh Lord: May your Word only be spoken; and may your Word only be heard; in the name of Jesus Christ, the living Word. Amen.

A stone's throw from the house where I grew up, there grew a stand of tall pine trees. They stood in a single line, at the top of a slow rise in the land, in the midst of the frames of perennials that grew on the nursery run by my step-father.

I loved those trees. They were good climbing trees. I don't know how tall they were, but they felt tall. Yet without too much effort, I could climb nearly to the top, and perch myself in the canopy with a view over a field of frames, its irrigation equipment, and the treetops to the south.

It was especially fun when the wind blew, because the trees would gently sway, but I wasn't afraid. I don't know if pine trees have particularly deep roots, but I felt secure there. My childhood was spent a bit on the lonely side, and those trees helped me feel both above it all *and* connected to something strong and beautiful.

The Prophet Jeremiah tells us this morning, "Blessed are those whose trust is the LORD. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes; and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought, it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit."

I wonder what kind of tree you picture, when Jeremiah speaks of trees and makes the connection between trees and blessedness. Why is this a great image for being blessed?

Trees are important symbols throughout the Scripture, from beginning to end. At the beginning, according to Genesis, Adam's first home is a garden whose primary feature was trees. (2.9-20) And of course, it's the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that is at the center of Adam and Eve's power struggle with God. (2.17; 3.6)

At the end of Scripture, in the Revelation to John, at the center of the Heavenly City, straddling the river of the water of life, stands the tree of life, with twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month (this was an early prototype of the Henry and David monthly gift packages) and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

In between the beginning and the end, there are trees of all sorts: cedar—source of the wood of Solomon's temple and for ships; palm—symbol of victory and kingship; olive—symbol of prosperity and domestic tranquility; and many others. And, for Jeremiah, and elsewhere in the Scripture, a tree with deep roots by a stream is a symbol for the one whose trust is the Lord. That person is blessed, can weather life's storms.

How do trees and blessedness connect with what Jesus has to say about blessedness in the Gospel of Luke this morning?



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This section of Luke is called Blessings and Woes, for obvious reasons. It is the introduction to a larger teaching unit called the Sermon on the Plain, because Jesus is standing on “a level place” when he gives it. There are similar sections in Matthew, with a different emphasis called the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus probably offered these teachings many, many times, in a variety of contexts, so it’s not surprising that there would be different versions.

In Luke, Jesus says, to his disciples, *those who would follow him*:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

What an encouragement to those disciples who are on the margins, financially, physically, and emotionally.

And then he says, to his disciples, *those who would follow him*.

Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry

Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

What does this mean to those disciples who are financially, physically, and emotionally secure?

Now we want to pay close attention to the word, “woe.” It is not the same as “cursed,” though our mind might go there because Jeremiah uses that word so strongly this morning. No, “woe” is more like “whoa!” as in slow down, take it easy, pay attention now, watch what you’re doing. (A shout out to the Tuesday morning men’s prayer group, for teasing out that connection between woe and whoa.)

So, it’s not, “Cursed are you who are rich, full, laughing.” It’s, “Hey, pay attention to the ways those good things can distract you from the need of those around you, and maybe even from your own need. They can become idols. We forget that they come from God, and they are not Gods.

It is a statement of the way the world actually is, that we have to work harder to be aware of the poverty, hunger, and sadness of those around us, if we ourselves lose our familiarity with poverty, hunger, and sadness. Our comfort can all too easily become a barrier to the suffering of the world. It seems that, if we are disciples of Jesus, we must be aware of those places where *we* and those on the margins are poor and needy, *and* where we ourselves and those on the margins have rich gifts to offer.



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In other words, Jesus would have us, his disciples, learn that we are both blessed, and in need of blessing, and that we need to be a blessing to others, to be standing with those who are poor, who hunger, who are brokenhearted, who are despised, for whatever reason.

It seems to me that remembering to trust these words of Jesus, as the one who loves us more than we can imagine, this is what makes us like the tree by the stream.

When the drought comes, or the hurricane, or the earthquakes in our lives, it's clinging to Jesus, the one we can trust, who will give us deep roots. And roots not just to sustain ourselves, but to sustain others. Jesus is the tree we cling to. Our leaves stay green, we keep bearing fruit. We stand beside the heartbroken, the hungry, the poor, the despised, we bring shade and nourishment.

Jesus is the tree that brings the blessing. We need that blessing. And we need to bring that blessing to others.

**Amen.**