

“O Advent Tree”

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Jeremiah 33:14-16

Psalm 92

Luke 21:29-31

## 1. One Tree A Year

I’m going to guess that, at some point this Advent season, most of you will put up some kind of *tree* in your home.

In fact, since we’re already 2 whole days into the month of December, I’m going to bet that many of you have already done so.

Growing up, my family would make our annual pilgrimage to the tree farm in the next town over. I’d wander through the rows of spruces and firs, arguing with my brother over which was just the right height and shape, until ours toes and noses got so cold that we were forced into a compromise.

We’d bring home our chosen tree, invite it right into the living room, a place of honor. Then came the adorning: first the twinkling lights, and then, carefully, reverently, one family trinket at a time. All this would be accompanied—without fail—by the jazzy stylings of “A Charlie Brown Christmas.”

You all have your own traditions, I’m sure, and are making them. But we’ve agreed as a culture that this one tree a year—no matter if it’s cut, potted or plastic—will stand as a sign for us, a symbol of the holiday, the holy-day, that’s coming. Through an uncertain history of winter solstice celebrations and 16<sup>th</sup>-century German Protestants, this one tree a year has come to stand as a sign: of light and hope in this darkest time of the year.

And perhaps, if those first six letters of “Christmas” mean something more specific to you—then the tree might also be a sign of God’s enduring light and love in Christ, *Emmanuel*, God who is coming to be *with us*.

At least, that’s what it’s all *supposed* to be about, Charlie Brown, isn’t it?

## 2. Trees are Important to God

Now, trees have strong and deep religious roots.

In fact, it seems human beings have always had an inherently spiritual relationship with trees, across many cultures and traditions.

Trees mediate between earth and sky, fed by the sun they root down, invisibly connecting heaven and nature.

Some Muslims believe the name Allah written in Arabic actually resembles a tree's branches.

Buddha is said to have reached enlightenment under a tree.<sup>i</sup>

Our own Judeo-Christian tradition is rich in tree imagery, as evidenced by all three scripture readings today.

Open up the Bible and you'll find trees growing all over the place—from Genesis to Revelation. With over 300 hundred mentions of trees and forests in the Hebrew Bible alone<sup>ii</sup> -- over 300! -- we've got a kind of scriptural arboretum on our hands.

The bible describes our deep interconnection with trees since ancient Palestine—we've shared in their shade and splendor, fruit and wood. If you find yourself at the St. Louis Botanical garden, make sure you go into the greenhouse and find the room devoted to the diverse plants of the bible where you'll find, among others, date palm, pomegranate, fig and olive trees.

“Like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be” (Isaiah 65:22), declares the prophet Isaiah. The Hebrew prophets speak visions of justice and hope, through the language of trees. This time of year, we remember Isaiah's image of a messiah as a “shoot rising up out of the stump of Jesse” (Isaiah 11:1), which Christians have long read as the promise of Christ. So too, from Jeremiah today, we heard of the “righteous branch,” springing up to bring justice and salvation and peace.

(PAUSE)

And so, it turns out our Christmas trees are in good company. When we choose to honor a tree this time of year, when we sing carols of “O Christmas Tree,” we join our voices with generations past, who sang the psalms, the bible's original carols, themselves packed with tree imagery, like Psalm 92, which we heard together: the righteous “flourish like a palm tree...grow like a cedar in Lebanon”; Even “In old age,” God's beloved “still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap.”

Let's focus in now on our advent parable from the gospel of Luke. For, growing out of this prophetic and poetic tradition, Jesus often speaks in the language of the natural world. In this parable, he tells his disciples to look to nature in anticipation of God's coming: "Look at the fig tree," he says, "and *all the trees*," even though their leaves wither and fall, yet when we see their little buds sprouting, we trust and know the sweet fruit will return. In the same way, Jesus urges us, pay attention for signs—in nature; in your life—that God is near. The fig tree makes an apt parable for advent, instructing us to wait and watch for God with patience, even when our branches seem barren.

Of course it's no coincidence that Jesus speaks in metaphors of trees and seeds vineyards. It's *more* than metaphor. The incarnation—God *become a creature*—transforms how we understand *creation*. So these trees become a sign for us—natural prophets, teaching us how to live in justice and peace, as we yearn for God's kingdom.

### 3. The Trees are Crying Out

Jesus says, "Look at the fig tree, and *all the trees!*" and know that God is near. If we could look at all the trees, and I mean, *all the trees*—if we could zoom out to the entire planet—to *all the world's* forests that still cover about 30% of the planet's land?<sup>iii</sup> What would we *see*?

We would see forests being cut down and burnt up, on a massive scale —I'm *not* talking about cutting down Christmas trees here, which are more or less sustainable crops—

No, I mean, we'd see worldwide destruction and degradation of indigenous forests—and we'd see it especially in developing nations in tropical regions, like Brazil, Indonesia, Sudan, Myanmar.<sup>iv</sup>

If we could zoom out to see all the world's trees, we'd witness about a football field of forest being destroyed *every two seconds* in illegal logging.<sup>v</sup>

If we zoomed in a little to the Amazon forest, we'd see almost 20% of it already gone. Gone.

If we could look to all the world's trees, we'd see millions of animal species being displaced, endangered, and extinct as their homes and habitats are wiped out.

If we could see all these trees, we'd see evidence of more severe droughts, wildfires and famines brought on by rising temperatures;

If we could dig where the roots used to be, we'd see soil eroding, and dirt drying out.

If we could see all the trees, we'd see forests clear-cut in "slash-and-burn" farming, releasing carbon dioxide into the atmosphere; exacerbating and speeding up climate change and more extreme weather.

And if we could bear to keep looking at the effects of all this, we would see that this whole mess dramatically and disproportionately affects the world's poor.

Now sometimes, we don't need to zoom out, we don't have to look very far at all. We can look in our own backyard, quite literally, where we lost a tree to super storm Sandy. While that tree didn't affect us greatly.

Perhaps the missing tree in our backyard might be a kind of sign; a reminder of all those in who have been affected greatly by patterns of increasingly extreme weather: from Cosy Beach, to the Rockaways, to New Orleans, and around the world.

If we could see like this—would we dare to look?

Could we bear listen to these trees weeping in lament and distress?

Could we bear to see God's green earth parched, wrecked and trashed; to hear the trees are crying out with all creation?

(PAUSE)

#### **4. Christ Calls Us to Respond in Community**

We ought to lament, but we do not have time to despair.

In his book, "Our Choice," a follow-up to *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore writes that because the majority of climate experts agree that we still have time to act, to avert the worst impacts of this damage, we cannot get caught in despair. "In any case," Gore writes, "despair serves no purpose when reality still offers hope."

In fact, deforestation is actually one piece in the climate puzzle where positive action has been made--better regulations in many nations, and tree-planting initiatives like the UN's Plant for the Planet: Billion Tree Campaign.

Take a moment and notice the children of the congregation who are with us today, as they are each first Sunday of the month, so that we can share communion together, as we'll do in a moment.

It is *precisely* among the children that we need to grapple with this in the context of our faith! Christ calls us to respond in community. We need to do this *in community* with children, because it is you, children of Redeemer, it is your

generation, and your children and grandchildren, who will inherit this planet from us. It's you and your kids who will one day look back through history and ask,  
 "How did the faithful respond when they heard the earth crying out?"

I don't think I would have the strength to face the world, to look at the trees and hear their cry, if it weren't for Christ—  
 if I didn't believe that Christ meets us *right there* in our overwhelmed feelings of anxiety--that God has not abandoned us.  
 That's what the angels meant, after all, isn't it,  
 When they foretold his name, "Emmanuel," meaning, "God is *with us*" ?

For surely, Christ knows human's capacity for destruction—  
 killed after all by fellow humans and hung on a *tree*.  
 But the story doesn't end there.  
 His love and light could *not* be overcome.  
 Out of the stump,  
 our God shoots up a bud of hope, a righteous branch.

The season of Advent is a fitting time to look to the trees--  
 a season of waiting with longing for God to break into our world—  
 a season of minor chord progressions preparing for the major key of Christmas—  
 that we ought to read the signs of the times,  
 and learn to wait with deep patience but also agency and urgency.

We think of Advent as a time in which we wait for Christ,  
 but I don't think we realize that God is also waiting for *us*!  
 Waiting for us to join Christ in planting seeds of action, and of hope.

We are uniquely positioned as Christ's church  
 to respond *as a community of justice* and hope.  
 As Christians grounded in respect and dignity for creation,  
 in wonder and humility, we are called to look to the trees and act boldly in  
 community, in ways that go far beyond tree-hugging.  
 Christ calls us to respond in community.  
 There's an African proverb that says, "If you want to go quickly, go alone; if you  
 want to go far, go together."<sup>vi</sup>

Together, in communities like this, where we gather to share simple gifts of bread  
 and cup, to be nourished by the hope of God's arrival, we participate in the future  
 God is bringing into being.

Together, we're already doing this in many ways, locally— every time you use your reusable red Redeemer grocery bag, in our church's Green Team that has sprung up over the past few years—and across our United Church of Christ. Come and learn and brainstorm more in two weeks, on the 16<sup>th</sup> in the adult forum Ian's leading on the UCC's "Mission 4/1 Earth" campaign happening this spring. There's no time to stay in despair, we must sew seeds of hope. Other churches with which we're in covenant are modeling this. I read this week of a Minnesota UCC church that's committed to becoming Carbon Neutral by 2030, and is already in the first stage of installing solar panels.<sup>vii</sup> "As one church", the senior pastor noted, "we are not going to" solve all problems, but we are called to be a model, a sign of dogged, imaginative, illuminating hope—  
 sort of like an evergreen lit-up in the middle of winter.

## 5. Let Heaven and Nature Sing

May we sew seeds of hope and justice—each of us, and as a church called into bold witness and right relationship with God, earth, and one another.

This Advent, pay attention, look at the trees. May every tree you see be as a sign to you; every lit up spruce be a little burning bush reminding you that God is near, still speaking, and that you are on holy ground (Exod 3:12).

And may Christ's coming in glory be the fulfillment not only of humanity's hopes, but of the longing and groaning of all creation—as we wait to sing a song of joy to the whole *world*—with the full chorus of heaven and nature. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Lisa Schencker, "Religious roots of trees branch into many faiths," *Christian Century*, Jul 30, 2012, <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-07/religious-roots-trees-branch-many-faiths>

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> <http://environment.nationalgeographic.com/environment/global-warming/deforestation-overview/>

<sup>iv</sup> Deforestation is both a cause and a result of climate change

(<http://www.greenpeace.org/international/en/campaigns/climate-change/science/deforestation/>)

Some of this information also comes from the book "Our Choice" by Al Gore, especially his chapter on "Forests"

<sup>v</sup> According to a 2012 study by the World Bank (<http://edition.cnn.com/2012/03/20/business/world-bank-illegal-logging/index.html>)

<sup>vi</sup> From Gore's "Our Choice" (12-13).

<sup>vii</sup> <http://www.ucc.org/news/minnesota-church-plans-to-be.html>