

Talk Tree to Me

February 28, 2021 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Daniel A. Smith

Texts: Ecclesiastes 3: 9-22 and Mark 8: 31-37

Let me begin today with an uplifting story from a dear friend who is a landscape architect. Last fall, he told me about and sent a link to his latest project called “Talk Tree to Me.” His firm created an ingenious installation making creative use of 12 trees of different species that stand tall along a riverfront park on the Detroit River. They hung placards from tree limbs inviting passersby to engage the trees in conversation through text exchanges. How did they get the trees to talk, let alone text? Using the wonders of Artificial Intelligence, they managed to populate a computer program with questions, words and phrases culled from a series of interviews with local Detroiters. The placards say: “I’m a tree! Text me and let’s talk!” Just text the given number “hello.” And immediately the tree will “text” you back. Here are some samples:

September 7, 7:04 pm --

Texter 3: Hello.

Weeping Willow: What brings you out today?

Texter 3: Celebrating my daughter's 17th birthday and a therapeutic walk

The conversations move on from there in ways whimsical, heartfelt and profound.

September 20, 3:28pm --

Serviceberry asks: How are you today?

Texter18: awww! we love you, tree

Serviceberry: What’s your first memory of a tree?

Texter18: tire swing and cherries

September 18, 2:03 pm --

Hardy Rubber Tree asks: What do you love about yourself?

Texter: My compassion and empathy!

Hardy Rubber Tree: That made me smile. Who makes you smile?

Texter: You make me smile (red faced smile emoji) 😊

On September 1, 5:15pm --

The Sycamore asks: What makes you happy?

Texter: Dancing. What about you?

Sycamore: I am happiest when I feel like I'm heroic. I like to do positive things and help other people. That's what makes me truly happy.

Sycamore: Would you want to know the future if you could?

Texter: Yes I would

Sycamore: Me personally, I don't know if I'd want to know the future. You know, it might hurt the enjoyment of the today. What can you do to make the future of your loved ones better?

Texter: Love them harder

Some even got political.

September 7, 2020 12:08pm --

Weeping Willow: What brings you out today?

Texter: I'm meeting a friend. Thank you for being here

Weeping Willow: Well, thanks for stopping here. There is a lot going on lately to say the least. I've been thinking...- How do you think our society can improve our ability to recognize and counteract inequity and privilege?

Texter: Revolt like the Zapatistas

Last one.

September 9, 2020 10:32pm --

Norway Maple: What is your first memory of a tree?

Texter28: Playing beneath the cherry trees in my parents' yard

Norway Maple: Oh, that's cool...You know, I think trees will definitely be important for us in Detroit as we face the climate crisis. I really would like to ask a crystal ball, but since we're chatting, what do you think it will take for humans to acknowledge and take the climate crisis seriously?

Texter: Significant disruption of the American economy

Norway Maple: Oh, that's a really interesting perspective, thanks for sharing. I think maybe with the pandemic we can change our thinking on public health and disaster preparedness. Start to look at things differently, you know

Texter: Absolutely!

www.talktreetome.com. Check it out! The snippets of conversation invite us to imagine the wisdom that trees and all of creation inherently hold. I've been thinking about trees a lot lately. In my daily time outside, as I walk by the trees here in our neighborhood, I wonder. What have they seen? What have they withstood? Recent books, like the more scientific, *The Hidden Life of Trees*, or the novel, *The Overstory*, offer accounts of the ways that trees are related, have families, and communicate with each other, whether through underground social networks, the so-called "wood wide web," or through windswept whispers of their leaves.

I wonder what they may be saying to us now, today even, as we honor this week's staggering milestone of over 500,000 lives lost in the US, with over 15,000 here in Massachusetts, over 2.5 million worldwide. Might they be saying "tell me about it?" As in, 'Hey, we feel ya. Remember the wildfires? This last year alone, tens of millions of acres of our siblings turned to ash, in Australia and the Amazon and in California, Oregon, Colorado, Washington. It's not just the willows who are weeping.' Which leads me to another question. How can we begin to hold the immensity of this loss and disruption, let alone the profound ways that COVID is forcing us almost daily encounter the realities of the climate crisis, of inequality, of our own mortality? Beneath the grief and lamentation, beneath the anger about and analysis of leadership failure and accountability, beneath our own repentance, how can we make meaning of it all?

I'll come back to the trees but first, let's turn to Ecclesiastes, and to the verses that follow the familiar lines that Jaz preached on last week. Yes, 'a time for every purpose under heaven' -- a time to be born, a time to die, a time to plant and a time to pluck up, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing. So true. And even there we get a taste of a wider

perspective. From naming these dyadic realities of life, the wisdom writing continues and sets our mind not merely on human things but on divine things, to quote our passage from Matthew. It invites us to step back from our own lives, activity and business and see our efforts as from a divine, eagle's eye view. "What gain have we from our toil?" Ecclesiastes asks rhetorically. The writer is telling us here, and in what follows, 'yes, recognize that each of us has a purpose and place for our activity and business. We each have God given gifts we must use, each suitable for their time! And yet, we also must recognize our place amidst all things, creation and beyond. God has given us a sense of past and future, but these aren't ours to fully know! There are limits to our knowledge and understanding, limits to how much we can do to make things right, to the ways we can change the world and disrupt the cycles and patterns of life, suffering, victimization and death. There's only so much we can know or do or change, so the writer exhorts us: don't forget to enjoy the ride while you can!' Hey, why not go talk to a tree and ponder the mysteries together.

At a deeper level, Ecclesiastes asks: how can we not only recognize but also accept the profound unknowability and unchangeability of what happens in this world. Let's face it: this part is where it gets challenging for most of us. 'But we can't just accept it. There's so much more we can do, there are such obvious reasons and people responsible for our current crises, including us! We can figure this out. Hopefully, yet there are temptations towards vanity here, a key theme of the Ecclesiastes! Yes, we need to be doing our parts, what's suitable to our God given gifts. Yes, there's a partnership of agency here with God, even when we slack on our end. And yet, the challenges we face will still and will always be bigger than us. Because we are human, the patterns of life and suffering and sin and death are inescapable. This is why Jesus says to Peter, get thee behind me. Jesus is resisting Peter's refusal to accept the harsh fact that Jesus is going to die, and be hung on a tree, no less.

So, am I saying we just accept it, like we're a bunch of animals, as the text seems to suggest? Isn't that approach too fatalistic? Doesn't it encourage apathy? Good questions. But if we stay with the text, we see it's not intended to provoke apathy but just the opposite. It's intended to inspire awe! Verse 14: "I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before God." Awe at the vastness of the universe! Awe at our relatively, super tiny snippets of understanding and action! Awe at the ways that God's love is intricately interwoven in and elaborately regenerating every last atom of our beings such that nothing will ever truly be lost!

Our theme for this season of Lent is Ashes to Ashes: A Time for Turning and Returning. Ashes not just for Ash Wednesday, but as prompts for ongoing reflection as we wrestle with the realities of this time. Ashes as a symbol of creation, of mortality, of repentance and of the cross. Ashes as a reminder, as in verses 19 and 20, "we all have the same breath...all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. We are made dust from and to dust we return." Ashes as a reminder that we are made from love and to love we return, a love in which nothing and no one is ever truly lost. We need a wide-angle lens to get this, but therein lies the power of the reflection and of our relationship with God. It expands our narrow, human and me-centric views, shifting our focus from human things to divine things, intended to humble and inspire us!

A pastor named Isaac Villegas wrote beautifully about trees and ashes awhile back. Ashes, he says, remind us that "we are earth formations, that the material of our bodies is in solidarity with the rest of creation. All of life sprouts from the earth, flora and fauna together, each as part of the other." He shared his shock in reading a medical study which revealed that more than half of our bodies are not human—at

a given moment, approximately 57 percent of our cells belong to other species, we contain multitudes: bacteria, viruses, fungi, archaea, a whole microbiome of life.” Our bodies, a microcosm of the world! What’s more, Villegas continues “when we touch ourselves with cremated palm trees [as we did a week ago Wednesday] our skin welcomes these remains into our bodies. The ritual displays our mutual belonging, that the material of their lives becomes ours. This liturgical practice offers a moment to contemplate the features of our *relationship*—to notice, for example, that we share the intimacies of breath: their oxygen and our carbon dioxide, a rhythm of inhale and exhale, one becoming internal to the other. The breeze carries the trees’ sighs to our lungs, as if conspiring with the God who breathed into the first human beings.”

He then connects trees to the cross in a vignette strangely reminiscent of where I began today: “In the eighth century, the tree upon which Christ was killed appeared in a dream to a Northumbrian poet. “I beheld the sorrowful tree of the Savior,” the author of *The Dream of the Rood* recounts. “It began to bleed on the right side.” The wounded tree soon moaned sounds that became words. “I was cut down from the edge of the woods. . . . They seized me there, these enemies, who made me into a rood, a spectacle.” The crucified tree describes the moment when the soldiers execute Jesus. “They pierced me with nails; on me are the wounds visible. . . . I was all drenched with blood poured out from that man’s side.” Villegas writes: “The two are victims of human violence together. The story of Jesus cannot be told without the story of the tree. The crucifixion fastens their identities to one another. And on Ash Wednesday we are drawn into Christ’s relationship to trees, a kind of arboreal sacrament...”

And you thought we’ve been in Lent all year. I have too! Yet this punctuation, these Lenten parenthesis if you will, of Ash Wednesday and Holy Week, framing our reflection on ashes and trees, symbols of creation, of mortality, of repentance and of the cross, have taken on new and deeper meaning this year of so much loss and disruption.

Yes, a time to mourn, 2.5 million lives and 20 million acres. We need that desperately. And, we also need a time to dance in awe and reverence at the marvels of God’s mystery and love which holds it all, which binds us together us together with new creation, which turns ashes into fertile ground, turns a lynching tree into a symbol of God’s ever rising truth and love!

Again, I wonder. What do the trees have say about all this mess we are living through? How might they and the dust from which we all come and to which we all return, be offering a wider perspective and with it the serenity to accept the things that cannot be changed, at least not by our efforts alone? How can we do our part and accept God’s partnership, purpose and patterning of our lives. How can we rest in this wisdom, even amidst so much grief, pain and loss?

I close with a poem by David Whyte, called *The Journey*:

Above the mountains
the geese turn into
the light again

Painting their
black silhouettes
on an open sky.

Sometimes everything
has to be
inscribed across
the heavens

so you can find
the one line
already written
inside you.

Sometimes it takes
a great sky
to find that

small, bright
and indescribable
wedge of freedom
in your own heart.

Sometimes with
the bones of the black
sticks left when the fire
has gone out

someone has written
something new
in the ashes of your life.

*You are not leaving
you are arriving.*

As we contemplate the vastness of the heavens and creation, the immensity of our individual and collective loss, it's not ours to leave ourselves in spaces of denial, despair or apathy. Instead, we are called to arrive here, right here, where we are in this beautiful yet broken world, to stand in humble awe, wonder, witness and acceptance, to be in ongoing conversation with that deeper reality of God's love that holds it all. By all means, go talk to a tree if you have too! Mourn with it and dance with it. Tell us what makes you happy and what part is yours to play. Work with it and rest under it. Strike up your own small snippets, and find rest too in the ever unfolding, unknowable, unchanging ways of God. Amen.



