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“The Birthright of Paradise”

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UU Area Church at First Parish in Sherborn

I'd like to start with a brief meditation so I invite you all to please close your eyes. Take a deep breath in...and out. I want you to imagine our gathering here not as a bunch of screens, but as a sacred circle of trees. Yes, I am asking you to imagine us all as trees. We are rooted deeply in the center of an ancient forest, our branches reach out toward each other, water and nutrients flow through our intertwined roots. It is fall so some of our leaves are turning red, orange and golden yellow as they slowly drift from our branches to the ground. Feel the sunshine and the breeze ever so softly swaying our branches. As you visualize all of us as trees in this moment, breathe in the deep peace of the forest.

This is the life of a tree, when it is rooted in its community of belonging. Thank you, you may open your eyes.

When I was a child I thought trees were magical. I grew up in Louisiana, a place full of ancient mossy oak trees that I loved to climb, and cypress tree ‘knees’ sticking up out of the river water. I remember I would lean far over the edge of our boat, trying to touch the ‘knees’ as we floated by. I remember my grandmother teaching me that the reason the stands of pine trees behind our home grew so close together was so that the trees could protect and hold each other up in heavy storms like hurricanes. I was amazed that such seemingly inanimate things actually knew how to take care of each other.

There is scientific proof that healthy trees share water and nutrients through their root systems with sicker trees. A tree family will keep a dead stump alive – sometimes for over 100 years – in order for a new tree to eventually grow from it.

Trees don't just protect each other, either. In many forests, the branches of the trees stop growing outward as they approach each other, so that they may leave space for the sunlight to filter down to the plants on the forest floor.

There is also evidence that trees can warn other plants in their environment about pestilent bugs and other diseases. They send out warning signals by emitting gases into the air, and pushing chemical and electrical signals through their roots.

In all of these amazing ways of supporting each other and their environment, I have come to believe that trees can teach us a lot about belonging. Through these examples and many others – there are so many other examples - trees show us that we are at our best when we know our belonging to and responsibility for each other. In fact, our very survival – and theirs - depends on our understanding of those truths.

The legion of harms that we humans have committed against nature and each other is well-documented. We have bulldozed billions of acres of forest across the globe to feed our voracious consumption practices. In a very similar way, imperial colonialism has decimated countless

indigenous cultures, traditions and peoples to serve a destructive and centuries-long progress narrative.

We have eradicated thousands of biodiverse species, only to replace them with monoculture tree plantings – which are incapable of restoring biodiversity, and they are themselves planted only to be cut down again and again. In a similar way, we have eradicated the cultural biodiversity of our nation by centralizing our white supremacy culture, which prioritizes white people and white practices as the norm, making all non-white people and cultures “other.”

And finally, observing the fires in the West, I cannot help seeing in that tragedy an obvious metaphor. As trees explode into matchsticks, our connections to each other and the planet are also further set ablaze, burning a path through our interconnected web of existence and seemingly scorching our hopes for a world of justice and peace.

Reckoning with these realities is difficult, I know – and it feels hard especially now, when everything – *everything* - seems to be at a fever pitch.

For my part, I find a lot meaning and theological grounding in a place you might not expect: the world of pre-Nicean Christianity. For those of you not up on your Christian history – which I’m assuming is most of you - I will explain. The Council of Nicea happened in the year 325 a.d. and formalized, for the first time, the central doctrine of Christianity as a faith where Jesus was divine and was sacrificed for our sins. If you’ve ever been to a church service where they recited the Nicene Creed, that creed came out of the council of Nicea.

In many ways, the purpose of this council was to aid the Emperor Constantine in establishing a state religion that supported his efforts of domination and empire across the globe. There’s a saying that Constantine didn’t convert to Christianity as much as Christianity converted to Constantine.

Before that council, before Constantine, the central doctrine of early Christianity was Paradise on Earth. Jesus’s presence in the world was not as an image of torture and sacrificial death, but as a source of wisdom, love and eternal life. Earth itself was seen and revered as a gift from God to be cherished and preserved, a world of diverse and divine beauty, where all beings sought to live together in harmony and mutual flourishing. Instead of waiting and praying for a Heaven in the afterlife, early Christians celebrated the Paradise that God gave them, right here on earth.

In the *Apocalypse of Paul* which is part of New Testament apocrypha – apocrypha are writings that date back to the time of the Bible, but aren’t considered officially part of the Bible. So in the *Apocalypse of Paul*, Paul states “I entered Paradise and saw a tree planted from whose roots water flowed out. And the Spirit of God rested on that tree and said “From the beginning, before the heavens and earth appeared, the Spirit has been resting upon this tree.”

The way I see it, trees and the rest of the natural world, are still trying to live in that paradise. They have survived hundreds of millions of years, and five mass species extinctions, and they continue to reach for the Paradise of interdependent existence that is all of our birthright. It is our human disavowal of that birthright that threatens them but nevertheless, trees persist.

Speaking of that persistence, the environmental activist and writer Terry Tempest Williams spoke in an interview last month on the regeneration that can happen after forest fires. She talked about the mushrooms that spring from the ash as the ground begins to cool; the pine cone seeds that scatter only in extreme heat, ensuring the next generation of trees. She explains that there are indigenous ways of forest burning that bring back a cacophony of life after a fire and help Earth heal and regenerate itself.

In her poem “A Burning Testament,” Williams writes “We are not the only species that lives and loves and breathes on this planet called Earth. Trees will grow and forests will rise again, as living testaments to how one survives change. I will mark my heart with an X made of ash that says ‘the power to restore life resides here.’”

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We can choose to restore life to our interdependent web. I believe very much that that is true. We can choose to reclaim that power to heal and live into it, or we can continue in our attempts to destroy it.

Friends, I don't think any of us would say we want to destroy it. But our actions matter more than our words. Can we remember the inherent wisdom of belonging that nature has never forgotten? As we seem to teeter ever closer to the edge of annihilation, can we be a part of the Great Turning away from destruction, away from consumption and greed, and find our own path back to Paradise on Earth?

In this time of brutality, vitriol and despair, we who know the truth of our interdependent existence with all life on Earth, need to act in accordance with that truth. Interdependence demands an ethic of belonging. This ethic of belonging must be rooted in justice and compassion for our fellow beings, humans and non-humans. If we let them, trees can teach us this ethic of belonging. But to do otherwise is to disown nature and each other.

So my prayer for us is that we not forget the birthright of Paradise. Let us not forget the sacred grove of belonging that we visualized at the beginning of this sermon. As Earth reckons with grief, greed, and trauma, we too are grappling with a history and a culture that have moved us far from that Paradise.

But yet, in that grappling, may we also know that the power to restore life resides here. [hand on heart]. May it be so. Amen.