

Trees of Hope

There is something about a tree that inspires hope for the future. Perhaps, it's the seasonal cycle of those trees which are not evergreens: seemingly dead in the depths of the winter, ever bursting into bud in the spring with lushness in summer and riotous color in the fall. Perhaps, it's the uncanny ability of some of them to come back to life even when cut down, with shoots of new life sprouting up from the forlorn stump. Perhaps, it's their ability to live many years past human expectancy, standing as strong sentinels over the passage of decades and even centuries. I think it's this last that's given rise to proverbs such as the one, variously attributed, that says, "A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in." Trees are symbols of hope for the future. Indeed, Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, is quoted as saying, in response to the question of what he would do if he knew the end of the world would be tomorrow, "I would plant a tree."

This idea that trees stand as symbols of our hopes for the future continues today. Throughout my life, I've been aware of the drive in Israel, now over a century old, to reforest that country, denuded by centuries of war and poverty. Trees are often planted in memorial, such as the rhododendron outside the front door of this building. Even in the presence of death, we are reminded, there is hope for the future. And trees are planted to commemorate events, with the idea that what is being commemorated will hopefully have impact far into the future. In Houston three years ago, my alma mater, Rice University, planted the Rice Centennial Grove at Hermann Park, across Main Street from the campus, commemorating that year's 100-year anniversary of the University's founding and the next year's centennial of the park.

Sometimes, trees are made to symbolize hopes for a more near-term future. An evergreen tree, real or fabricated, brought into the house and decorated at this time of year, carries childish hopes of the quick appearance of boxes with bright paper and ribbons which will, by the morning of the 25th, disgorge the reality of children's most fervent desires. A fictional version of such a tree looms large for children of my generation in our hopes for peace on earth and goodwill in, well, the neighborhood, anyway. I hope everyone remembers the rather scraggly-looking little cartoon tree from "A Charlie Brown Christmas." Do you remember the story? In the midst of trying unsuccessfully to direct his friends in a Christmas pageant which he hopes will get their minds off of the commercial aspects of Christmas, Charlie Brown is dispatched by the gang to find a suitable tree as a set piece. He is advised by Lucy van Pelt to "Get the biggest aluminum tree you can find, Charlie Brown, maybe painted pink." This was the mid-60s, remember. Instead, he adopts a tiny real tree ("Gee, do they still make wooden Christmas trees?" asks the faithful Linus). Charlie Brown is once again in hopes that the gang will be inspired to reject Christmas commercialism. Predictably, they laugh him out of the theatre, although they do rally 'round him and the tree at the end and Charlie Brown's hope of a Christmas of peace and love is realized.

A very similar little tree looms large in Boyer family lore as well. With Connie just days removed from an emergency Caesarian and baby Kit still ensconced in Hermann Hospital under lamps in treatment for jaundice, Connie and I piled into my old jalopy on one of the coldest days in Houston history and sallied forth in search of a tree we could afford. We brought that forlorn little tree home in temporary place of our baby, with no presents for each other to put under it. It represented our hopes for a brighter future, a healthy baby, and many Christmases to come. Guess that one worked out OK.

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I always think of those bedraggled little trees when I hear passages about “the branch of David” or Isaiah’s more famous “shoot from the stump of Jesse” at this time of year. Perhaps that’s because I think the hopes of the people who heard Jeremiah must have been so modest. It was, after all, one of the darkest times in the history of the Children of Israel to date. The story is set during the dreadful time of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem. It is some 350 years since David and Solomon’s united kingdom was divided into Israel in the north and Judah in the south and about 150 years since Assyria obliterated the northern kingdom. The kingdom of Judah has been under at least nominal control of Babylon for a generation but has recently revolted. Now the Babylonians are back in power, intending to destroy Jerusalem. At the court of King Zedekiah, the prophet Jeremiah is under arrest, confined to the Court of the Guard, for continually warning that the kingdom will fall. Under the siege, the surrounding landscape has been devastated; even a little “Charlie Brown tree” would have been a miracle. People in Jerusalem are starving. In the midst of these exceedingly anxious times, Jeremiah hears this promise from God. The Kingdom will be restored under a son of David. Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.

To this day, Yahweh has not fulfilled that promise in the way that Jeremiah’s contemporaries might have wished. Oh, Jerusalem has been rebuilt... and burned again, and rebuilt again... several times. The Jews returned to their home... and were exiled again and have returned again... but never have they been safe. No descendant has sat on the throne of David since the time of the Babylonians... at least, not in the way that many expected. Instead, Israel, the kingdom of those loyal to the God that David worshipped, has been reconstituted as a spiritual kingdom and gentiles, members of “the nations,” who are also loyal to Yahweh through Jesus, the Son of David, have been “grafted in” to Israel, as Paul put it, like “a wild olive shoot... to share the rich root of the olive tree.” Branch of David, stump of Jesse, the rich root of the olive tree – all of these are truly trees of hope.

A tree is mentioned in our Gospel reading for this morning, as well, although its function as a tree of hope may be a little more ambiguous at first glance. This passage comes from Luke’s version of a passage in Mark, the beginning of which we read last week, what scholars call “the little apocalypse.” You will remember that apocalyptic was a genre of literature common to late Old Testament and early Christian times in which fanciful, poetic language was used to disguise a message of hope for oppressed or fearful people. The central message of apocalyptic literature is always the same: no matter how bleak things may look now, God is in control and will triumph in the end. God’s people will find salvation. In Luke’s version it seems clearer that Jesus is using what must have been the popular apocalyptic language of his time to direct the disciples’ speculations away from the end times.

Consider: the first two verses of this passage could actually be describing life as usual for humankind. People are always seeing signs in the heavens; astrology is as popular now as it was in the Roman Empire. Nowadays, we don’t just look to the stars and planets as augurs of our lives; we also keep a weather eye peeled for rogue asteroids and the return of ancient astronauts. Are we not still perplexed by the roaring of the sea and the waves? How much energy is expended each year in trying to track hurricanes and in arguing about how much impact human use of carbon fuels is having upon that phenomenon? Still, people are worried unto distraction

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about the “great powers of the world,” now understood as mighty governments rather than gods. Jesus seems to be poking fun at the doom-sayers. The world, linked to broken humankind as it is, is always in trouble. The “end times” are always coming.

Jesus told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.” In other words, when you see these signs, which occur constantly, then the kingdom of God is near. But what does that mean? Earlier in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus has used a very similar phrase in teaching the disciples what to say if they are rejected as traveling teachers. They are to point out to those who will not hear them that the kingdom of God has come near. They have brought the Good News of God’s love to them. Surely, it means the same thing here. Is there trouble in the world? Remember that God’s kingdom of love is near! This is not a warning of the end of the world; this is a reminder that God loves us and will care for us no matter what our circumstances. This, my sisters and brothers, is a message of hope!

Do you see the fig tree, Jesus asks his disciples. As long as you see it bearing new leaves and blossoms and figs, you will know that God loves you. Hope for better things! Do you see the apple trees around us, my friends? As long as we see them go from winter dormancy to spring beauty to summer fecundity to fall harvest, we will know God loves us. We should dare to hope! Do you see the evergreens bearing their mute witness to the everlasting love of God? Rejoice and hope!

I want to mention one more tree of hope this morning. It is the one that hangs above me. The Romans designed it as an instrument of torture. The Jews understood it as the tree of curse. But in the death and resurrection of Jesus, it became the ultimate tree of hope, for in Jesus’ death and resurrection is the death of the power of sin and brokenness and evil. In Jesus’ death and resurrection are the death of our fear and the destruction of our chains and the glad new birth of our hope for our resurrection. We will sing in a moment of our Lord’s coming. But we have also sung that he is already come. Christ has come, Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ is coming again. Alleluia! We need no longer live in fear of what may come on this mortal coil but instead live in hope. For the kingdom of God is near to us. It has come and it is coming. It came in that feed trough in Bethlehem, it came each time Jesus healed someone, it is coming each time he heals us. The kingdom comes every time we act as subjects of the King of love, every time we act out of the love with which God fills us. We live in hope for the kingdom to come and we live in the reality of the fulfilment we already have with God and with all who claim the promise of hope. Thanks be to God! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.