

“Mast Year”

Psalm 1

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A couple of years ago, in the fall, as I was getting into my car I noticed a strange glint from the roof. On closer examination, I saw that the roof of my car was covered in dozens and dozens of dents. I was perplexed. When had this happened? HOW had it happened? Nothing much had changed – I hadn’t noticed anything unusual, or gone anywhere different. I was parked in the same spot as always. I figured the damage was done, whatever had caused it, and that it wasn’t a crisis. Just some dents on the roof.

A few weeks later, one of the church’s neighbors called the office. New to the suburbs in general and Hastings in particular, they had a question: why was their property being absolutely blanketed with acorns from our oak trees? Was this typical? And didn’t the squirrels seem especially numerous, and especially plump? What could be done about it?

That’s when something clicked. I *had* noticed there were a lot of acorns, and it seemed like more than usual. After a little bit of googling, I had my answer: it was what scientists call a “mast year”: a year when the oak trees produce a bumper crop of acorns. Mast years actually ensure the survival of the species. If the acorn production were even and consistent from year to year, then the squirrel population would grow to what the local ecosystem could sustain, and stay about at that level, with all the acorns being consumed every year. The cycles of higher and lower production mean that in mast years, there are more acorns than the local squirrels and other critters can eat, giving those surplus acorns a fighting chance to take root and grow into oak trees. We were in the middle of a HUGE mast year – one of the biggest in memory – and that was why my car was covered in dents, and the neighbors were losing their mind trying to clear their lawn, and the squirrels were the size of chubby cats.

Tree imagery is abundant in scripture, from the “tree of knowledge of good and evil” in the Garden of Eden all the way through to the image in Revelation of the “tree with leaves for the healing of the nations.” Today’s Psalm uses the image of a tree to reflect on what it means to be

a person of faith. This is the first psalm in the Book of Psalms, and commentators note that that is not an arbitrary choice or a coincidence. The Book of Psalms took written shape long after the individual psalms themselves; it collects the beloved songs of a worshiping community for posterity. Just like you would be thoughtful and deliberate about what picture goes first in a baby book or a wedding album, or what piece of music is programmed first in a concert, the compilers of the Book of Psalms chose *this* psalm specifically to set the tone, to make a statement about faith, and God, and worship. In his new translation of the Book of Psalms, Robert Alter writes, “It is easy to understand why the ancient editors set this brief, eloquent psalm at the head of the collection. In content, it is a Wisdom psalm, affirming the traditional moral calculus (to which Job will powerfully object) that it pays to be good, whereas the wicked will be paid back for their evil. . . . In style, the psalm is a lovely instance of the force of familiar imagery favored by the psalmists.”

Alter points out that there are two sets of images to contrast righteousness and evil-doing. First, we have contrasting images of paths or ways – the “path that sinners tread” mentioned in the first verse of the psalm contrasts with the “way of the righteous” in the last verse. And then we have a set of natural images: while wickedness is like chaff, the useless husks blown away by the wind, a righteous person is “like a tree planted by streams of water, that bears its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither.”

Commentator Scott Hoezee highlights two concerns that may arise as we consider this image. First, there is the fact that this psalm, and many of the psalms, seem to starkly divide people into two categories. There are righteous people, and there are “the wicked.” The world, we know, is more complex than that. There are precious few mustachioed villains gleefully doing evil, and just as few entirely perfect people. As a wisdom psalm, though, this psalm is about teaching and encouraging people towards righteousness, so we can understand that the mentions of “the wicked” aren’t meant to inform us that there are two kinds of people in the world, good and bad. Rather, the framing is meant to guide the people of faith in the right way, to seek that path of righteousness, to do the things that “the righteous” do. The second problem, Hoezee notes, is that the psalm suggests that righteous people will flourish, while wicked ones will suffer – but we know that there are good, kind, faithful folks who face heartbreaking situations, and we know that there are some real jerks who seem to have all kinds of good things come their way.

But perhaps we should come back to the image of the tree.

The psalm says that faithful people “are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.” The psalmist is not saying that rewards will come to the tree – its hard to know what those even would be.

Good fertilizer? Christmas decorations? The prospering is in the flourishing itself. The prospering that the psalmist speaks of is in the tree’s resiliency, its steadfastness. The promise, I think is not that the life of faith will pour rewards on us or shelter us from adversity, but that the life of faith gives us roots that offer resilience and strength even in the midst of struggle.

Earlier this year I read *The Overstory* by Richard Powers – a novel that won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2019. The novel is shaped around five trees, and the people who interact with them; it’s a bit of a strange read, but moving. One of the characters in that novel is a researcher who makes a discovery about trees, and I was surprised to learn that she is based on a real researcher, and that the discovery is a real scientific thing rather than a fictional conceit: trees are social beings. Ecologist Suzanne Simard researches trees, and has found that trees seem to share information. A Douglas fir that is experiencing a harmful insect infestation sends chemical warning signals to nearby trees. Underground networks of fungi and roots function similarly to a neural network, allowing for signaling and for sharing of nutrients. Scientists had long been stumped by the phenomenon of mast years. One would assume that these years might be on a numerical cycle – every four years, perhaps – but they aren’t. You might think they were somehow triggered by the weather patterns, but that isn’t true either. So how is it that the oak trees all happen to overproduce in the same year? It seems likely that Simard’s research holds the key – that somehow the oak trees are coordinating with one another, that there is coordination among the community of trees.

The image of a tree planted by the river might seem like a solitary and static image. It might seem like a promise that if you reach toward God, meditate on God’s word, walk in the path of righteousness, then you will be like a tree, strong and secure and self-sufficient, enduring and constant. But we are learning that trees are communal. That the roots that connect them to the earth also connect them to each other. It’s changed the way I hear that tree image from the psalms.

To be like a tree is not to be self-sufficient; it is to be deeply connected in ways that are not always fully visible, or fully understandable – connected to God, connected to community, connected to history. To be like a tree is not to be static and unchanging: a tree might not visibly change before our eyes, but it is a dynamic organism, growing and adapting, cycling through the seasons, drawing nutrients and bearing fruit, giving and taking, being injured and healing, and eventually reaching the end of its life cycle and returning to the earth.

That's the invitation of the psalm: to enter into the life of faith and become like a tree planted by the river. To enter into the spiritual disciplines – prayer, scripture, worship – that cultivate deep roots and strong trunks and flexible branches. To be deeply connected, grounded in God, reaching toward the sky. To be grow in faith, slowly, slowly, but undeniably.

Blessed are those whose delight is in the word of the Lord; they are like trees planted by streams of water. In all they do, they prosper.

May that blessing be ours, today and every day.

Amen.