

## FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**September 26, 2021- 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Pentecost/25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a, Psalm 1

**IMAGINE YOU ARE A TREE...**

This summer when I was in the Rocky Mountains outside of Manitou Springs Colorado, I met a tree named Methuselah. It is one of the oldest Douglas Fir trees in the Colorado Rockies. In March of 1878 a fire burned most of the trees in that area of the mountains, but two days later there was a snow storm that had 40-foot drifts and the tree survived.

In 1928 there was another devastating forest fire and the tree survived again. The exact age of Methuselah the tree is not known, but it is estimated that it is over 250 years old. Its roots run deep, its bark has survived beetle infestations, nearby logging and fire, but the tree continues to grow. It now has its own plaque with its name and history, and continues to thrive on the side of a mountain, at about 8,000 feet, surrounded by people who continue to love and protect it, and marvel at its age.

This morning I want you to use your imagination, and imagine that you are a tree.

I'll give you a minute to let you choose what kind of tree you want to be. Do you feel like a fruit tree, an evergreen, an oak, a baobab, or a maple? Think about what kind of tree you are.

And don't worry, I'm not going to make you act out being a tree, or tell anyone else what tree you chose!

But I do want you to imagine that you are a great big tree.

You are not a sapling...but a full-grown tree whose branches fill the sky.

Now as you think about yourself as a tree, a tree with all the human emotions that fill your life, I have some questions to help you pay attention to what is going on in your life as a tree.

What brings you joy these days?

What are your concerns, or your worries that you carry with you?

How are you doing with the strong winds that blow?

Are you a tree living with drought,

a tree living with the threat of forest fires on the horizon,

a tree living with flowing water that feeds you?

What is life like around you, that affects your life as a tree?

As you imagine yourself as a tree, and think over these questions, are you feeling like a healthy tree?

Or are you feeling a bit brittle?

Do you have healthy green leaves, or pine needles, or branches,

or are you feeling like a tree that needs some more water and nutrients?

If you've imagined yourself as a fruit tree, are you producing an abundance of healthy fruit, or do you feel more like you're producing wizened, wormy fruit?

Are you getting enough water and sunshine, or have you been overshadowed by bigger, more powerful trees, that are blocking the light?

Are you planted in a dry and dusty place?

Can you hear the sound of a brook or river nearby?

This morning as you imagine yourself as a tree, think about what's going on for you in the journey of faith:

Do you feel like praising God this morning, or wondering where God went this week?

Do you wonder how God could make you this kind of tree, or feeling close to your Creator in the life you're living?

And what about the other trees around you. Do they help you or hurt you?

Are you in a community, or standing tall and alone?

This morning as you imagine yourself as a tree, and think all the thoughts that my questions have stirred up, or if you're just thinking it's weird that I've asked you to imagine that you are a tree, I want you to listen again to what Psalm 1 says. (Compilation of translations)

God blesses those people who refuse evil advice from wicked people

God blesses those who won't walk on the same paths that sinners walk,

God blesses those who won't sit with scoffers and those who sneer at God and God's people.

Instead, these people are made happy by the Word of God, they think about the Bible's teachings day and night.

They are like trees growing beside a stream,

trees that produce healthy fruit in each season,

and always have leaves that never wither...

They succeed in everything they do...Those who follow God are protected.

This morning as you imagine yourself as a tree, I want to ask you about your root system, because as people, and as trees, our root systems ultimately determine our health.

You are a full-grown tree.

Do your roots reach deep enough to get the nutrients you need as a person, as a Christian, as someone on the journey of faith?

Do you feel like your soul is being fed, or are you dying of thirst?

Are your roots deep enough to withstand the storms that come into every life.

Do forest fires and droughts threaten your life or can you withstand them?

Are you being fed, even in the storms?

Are you feeling too tired to keep reaching your roots down deeper into life and faith, or do you feel like you have plenty of energy for the journey?

What's the soil like around you? Is it desert-dry, full of heavy clay, rich and dark, is there a lot of shifting sand all around you, or is it full of life?

You are a full-grown tree.

What are you consuming to keep your spirit, your soul, your life, growing?

Are you just getting by,

growing every now and then,

or are you thriving in life and in faith?

As you imagine your life as a tree, I want to tell you this:  
We cannot live this life alone! We cannot be thriving trees on our own.

We cannot grow by our own strength—

we'll never be strong enough, or smart enough, or wise enough, or brave enough to do this on our own.

We cannot grow without God: God's salvation in Christ, God's Holy Spirit in our hearts, and God's words in the Bible.

We cannot survive well, without our roots reaching down into this nutrient rich soil of our God, that has been given to us as a gift.

We can't go on living without the water that brings life.

We cannot grow leaves that don't wither, without the light and warmth of the sun.

We just cannot grow or truly live on our own.

You are a full grown tree.

And this is a day to pay attention to the place where you are planted.

There's that old saying that became popular in the 60's that I shared with the children this morning: "Bloom where you are planted." That was for the children's sermon.

It is not the saying for this part of the sermon.

The saying for this part of the sermon is on the back cover of your bulletins: Can you bloom where you are planted? Or is it time to uproot yourself?

Are you getting enough nourishment, enough warmth, enough water of life?

Are your roots growing deeper,  
are your branches reaching out to the sun,  
are you giving shade to others,  
are you feeding others,  
providing shelter for others,

or is it time to transplant yourself into a healthier place, so that you can grow into the tree God created you to be?

The book of James says that if we try to grow on our own, if we only rely on our own wisdom and strength, and the advice of the world around us, then we are not growing into the trees that God intended.

James says, in so many words, that it is time to transplant ourselves to a healthier place if our tree is growing: bitterness, envy, conflict and selfishness.

According to James, if we find ourselves lying, or acting as if we are better than others around us, then we aren't producing God's harvest.

If we realize that at home or work, at school, with family and friends, or here at church, that we are causing upset, or fighting, or broken trust, or pushing people to take our side over someone else's side, then we are choosing the world's wisdom over God's wisdom.

He says that choosing the world's wisdom will allow "disorder and wickedness of every kind" to be a part of our lives and the lives of those around us.

James doesn't pull any punches, he says: "Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual and devilish." (3:15)

Can you bloom where you are planted in your life?

According to James, fitting his words to the question of this sermon, we'll know when we are living life as healthy trees that honor God, when we are relying on God's wisdom, God's nourishment, God's healing light, and God's life-giving water.

Then, when we are trusting God's strength to grow,

we'll be trees producing a harvest of: purity, peace, gentleness, and a willingness to yield to other people. We'll produce a harvest of mercy and true kindness, and we'll grow good things for others and for God.

The only way to be truly healthy trees, is to rely on what James calls the "wisdom from above." He says: "Draw near to God and God will draw near to you."

The Psalmist and James say that if we are learning about God, if we are following Christ, if we are letting ourselves be shaped by the Holy Spirit, and if we are taking God's words in the Bible inside ourselves—so that they are in our thoughts, day and night, then we will be like trees planted beside a flowing stream.

Our roots will grow down deep,  
the fresh flowing living water will quench our deepest thirsts,  
and the sunshine of Christ's light and life will warm us and help us grow  
...because we cannot do this alone.

Imagine that you are a tree, a full grown tree whose branches fill the sky.

Can you bloom where you are planted?

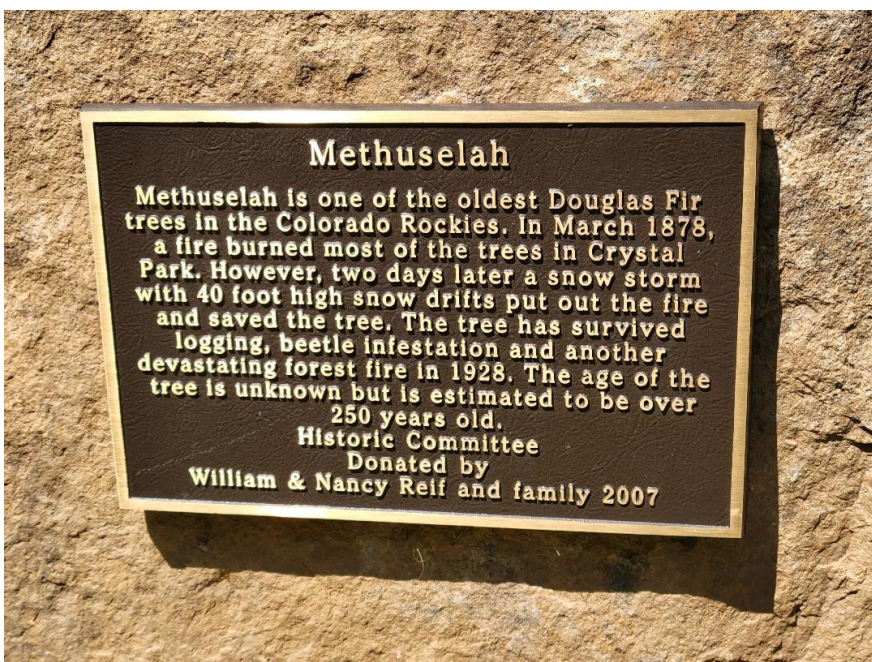
OR is it time for a transplant?

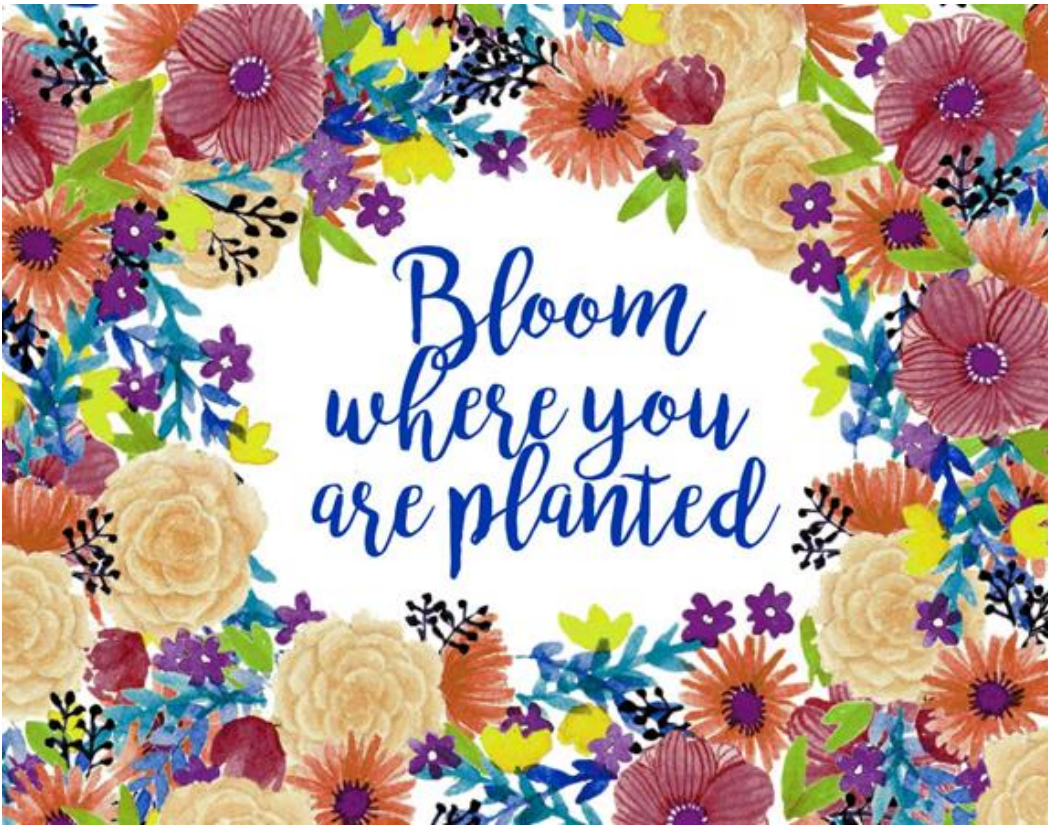
Are you living in a place and in a way that helps you draw near to God as  
God draws near to you?

By the power of God's shaping, encouraging, feeding, protecting love,  
may we be like Methuselah the tree on the side of the mountain in Colorado,  
bringing honor and glory to God who loves us.

May our roots and our lives draw near to God,  
as God continually draws near to us,

so that we can live as God created us to live and grow!





 *Bloom*  
Where You Are Planted ...  
Or Uproot Yourself!