

“What Did God Tell the Trees?”
Genesis 1
The Fourth Sunday of Easter in Celebration of Earth Day
April 21, 2024
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At the end of the sixth day, God gave Humans our first commands. Be fruitful and multiply, and be caring stewards of all that God has made. We know that we Humans have not always been so good at following those first instructions.

At the end of the fifth day, God also commanded the Bird family and the Fish family to be fruitful and multiply. And I have every reason to believe that the fifth day included some special lessons in the secrets of song for Bird and acrobatics for Fish.

But the thing that I want to know the most is what God said on the third day, to the Trees.

What did God tell them to make their fruit and their sap so sweet? Perhaps that their non-Tree kin would have days of bitterness and sorrow. And that the sweetness of their sugar would serve as reminder that not all days are like that.

Maybe God hinted to the Trees that some of us would have difficulty learning to share. So they learned to fill their limbs with so much fruit that nobody could ever imagine keeping it all to themselves.

Did God tell the Trees that the rest of us would need some shelter? A bit of shade to protect us from the sweltering sun or some cover to keep off the rain. A perch for a nest or a burrow under the roots, somewhere safe and out of the wind to raise a family.

What did God whisper to them about how to breathe? Did God say “I’ll start the breathing for everyone, if you’ll keep them going?”

Did God vow to them that they would not go forgotten? And tell them that they had their own part to play, and that they would be the ones to lift up God for the rest of us to see?

Did God assure them that in this they would be participating in life, and not death? Did God promise them that they would be saved too?

Did God teach them the rhythms of the universal song and make sure that they all knew that at the end of everything, they will finally get to clap their hands in joy?

I don’t know.

But I refuse to accept the notion that God wouldn’t also speak to the other parts of creation as God was creating them. How egotistical is it to think that we’re the only ones God talked to?

And I am also pretty sure that God has continued talking to the trees the whole time. God might even talk to them more than us. There have been many days where I would much rather talk to a Tree than talk to Humans. Or maybe the Trees just listen better.

The Bible begins and ends with stories about Trees planted near rivers and bearing fruit.

God didn't just hang out with the first Humans, but walked and talked with them in a garden of fruit Trees. So our story begins in God's orchard.

And it also ends in God's orchard.

In Revelation, God meets us after everything is over back in an orchard, where the leaves of the Tree of Life are medicine for healing all the horrible things we've done to each other.

And my favorite part, in the middle at the Resurrection, before Jesus appeared to the men disciples, Jesus appeared to Mary. But before Jesus appeared to Mary, the very first thing he did after leaving the tomb, was a little bit of gardening.

We know that God is a gardener. And it is no secret that the best gardeners spend a whole lot of time talking to their plants.

And I would give just about anything to finally learn what God has been saying to the Trees this whole time. Trees are smarter than any supercomputer could ever be. They know more about beauty and art than we ever will. They share their resources and take care of each other in ways we Humans couldn't even imagine doing ourselves. And I feel that if we could just figure out what God said to them to make them act the way they do, we would finally have the key for understanding everything else.

I read 17 books about Trees last year (and I'm halfway through number 18), and none of them had these answers that I'm looking for. I've even asked the Trees themselves over and over, but they never seem to have an answer either.

For much of the last year, the Red Maple in my backyard was my best friend. I rested in Maple's shade. I read books against her trunk. I marveled at her leaves. I watched Cardinals make a nest in her and grow from a family of two to a family of five. I played with her helicopter seeds just as I've done with other Maples my whole life, throwing them into the air and delighting as they spun gently to the ground. I sat beneath her while I carved spoons and bowls from the branches she gave me.

Maple and I had whole conversations together. I could say anything I wanted to, and she never ran away. I could ask any question, and she never grew tired of me. She was a reliable friend when that was the very thing I needed most.

Though I've read many books on trees and paid a great deal of attention to trees and land in scripture, it was Maple who completely changed the way I interact with God's Creation.

Some of the best advice I ever got about how to read scripture was to not think of the land as merely the setting. But to read scripture with the land itself as a character. In my own story, Maple is not just part of the setting where I spent a lot of time. Maple is absolutely a character in my story.

Last year, I spent a lot of time working with the Guns to Gardens project of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship. The project works like this:

If you have an unwanted firearm for any reason, you can donate it at a Guns to Gardens event where the Guns to Gardens volunteers will saw that gun into pieces, making it no longer a weapon. Then a blacksmith takes the pieces and forges gardening tools and art from them.

It is materially living out scripture and literally beating swords into plowshares with the hope that nobody will learn war anymore.

After the completion of the first Guns to Gardens event hosted by the congregations I was serving, my blacksmith friend Scotty got to work forging tools from the donated gun pieces. But we didn't have enough wooden parts from the guns to make any handles for the tools.

Being a carver, I volunteered myself to Scotty and said that I had a little bit of Red Maple wood at home and I could probably carve a couple handles for the tools.

Leading up to that event, I talked to Maple about it, a lot. A lot of planning and even more stress went into that event. So I know that she was well aware of it.

Now Maple was a big Tree, probably about fifty or sixty years old, and maybe fifty or sixty feet tall. She'd occasionally drop a branch as a gift for me, to carve a spoon, but never very big. She was a strong tree and had lived through many an ice storm or tropical storm without a scratch.

But about an hour after getting home and telling Scotty that I could make a handle or two from some maple wood, a windstorm kicked up. And I heard a huge crack outside. And then a thud.

And then all of the sudden as quickly as the wind began, the storm was over.

When I looked out the back windows, I saw that Maple, a strong, sturdy Tree who had weathered many a storm, had just given a massive branch that she had been growing and tending to for probably about fifteen or twenty years. That branch was enough wood for more tool handles than I could even imagine.

I don't think that Maple's gift was an accident or a coincidence. We know that the Earth cries out in lament when we poison her with our siblings' blood. And the Earth is very tired of crying out. And plenty of my other friends helped out in turning guns into gardening tools, so of course my best friend would want to help out. That's what friends do.

So I marveled at her generosity, and I told her thank you. And the next day, I got an ax and a saw, and I started making some tool handles.

And every day since then, I have continued to wonder what in the world God must have said to the Trees when God was creating them. Whatever it was, and whatever God keeps talking to them about, they appear to be good listeners.

As you know, I live very far from Maple now. She is almost 3,000 miles away back in North Carolina, and I am here in Seattle. But I still think of her all the time. Every day at work I eat my lunch with a spoon that she gave me, and I am grateful for her friendship.

These days I am learning to make friends with others in her family, with new names like Douglas and Sitka and Redcedar. I'm sure that they will listen just as well as Maple did, but it will take a while for me to get to know them well enough to ask them all these questions that are on my mind.

And maybe Douglas and Sitka and Redcedar will finally give me the answers I am looking for.

Though I asked her my questions over and over again hoping to learn what God shared with the Trees, the only thing Maple ever wanted to talk about was grace.