

This Sunday we go into the woods – the place of fairy tales and wonder;
of growth and diversity and fecundity

Forests and trees can be seen as wonderful, nurturing, healing...

They can be seen as frightening, mysterious, dark.

I think of trees as a universal symbol of goodness and happiness and life and joy –
they are overwhelmingly positive for me – until I heard an interview with
an ornithologist, Drew Lanham, who is Black.

Talking about the different reactions people might have to nature, and our
shameful and all too recent history of lynching, he said, "If your ancestors
were hung in trees, you might not be quick to want to go into the forest."

We can never assume our experience is that of another.

But as we recognize our reactions and where they come from, we can also invite
God's healing grace into us to transform our experiences of dark things.

How do you feel in the woods? What are the feelings forests bring up for you?

There are actual physical benefits to being under trees –

pheromones that positively affect our sense of well-being.

But they affect our spirits too, in very different ways than the grand landscape of
mountains, the vastness of oceans, the austere and wide open spaces of deserts.

Like those other landscapes, forests have grandeur and scope,

but they also have a life close-up, a multiplicity of organisms that work
together so that the whole system thrives.

Forests are intimate, close; the play of light constantly reveals new treasures.

A tree can remind us of God – grand, not fully seeable in one glance, but close,
with constantly changing revelation as the light of God plays in our lives.

Let's go into prayer and see how God might reveal God's self to us
in our imaginations...

Today we explore how it feeds our spirits to be in the forest.

But I want to go beyond that to invite us to think of ourselves as a forest.

Scientists are discovering that trees exist in community just as we do.

They are nurtured and protected in vast networks of fungi and other organisms
which carry not only nutrients and water, but also messages and safety.

Tree scientists can map these networks by seeing where chemical markers from one organism show up in others.

Research has confirmed the existence of these neural networks, which “heals, feeds and sustains the other members of the forest.”

I can think of no better description of mission than that.

Each one of us is part of a forest – we are not trees unto ourselves.

And each church is part of a forest – we are not churches unto ourselves.

We are part of our Diocesan forest, and our national Episcopal church and global Anglican forests; which are part of the worldwide community of churches.

We’re also part of the forest of other churches here in our immediate area, and of other faith communities. This forest of saints vast and deep!

What if thought of ourselves more as forests than trees?

Jesus didn’t have a lot to say about trees, but he did talk about fruit.

He told his followers on his last night with them that they had been called as his followers to bear fruit, fruit that would last.

That hasn’t changed – we are here not just to be comforted by our worship and delight in seeing one another; we are here to be nurtured into greater fruitfulness.

We are meant to be fruit-bearing trees.

What fruit comes out of your life? What fruit do you feel called to bear?

Just maybe, if we were sharing nutrients and collaborating in our forests, we’d be better equipped to live into that mission of God.

As forests we can weather times of hunger and of plenty, sorrow and joy, abundance and scarcity.

But there’s something fascinating about the networks in forests:

Scientists have discovered that certain trees function as Mother Trees, sending nutrients to their offspring, trees that sprouted from their seeds.

But sometimes these Mother Trees also send nutrients to organisms not related to them, organisms that the whole system needs to thrive.

Jesus was a Mother Tree, whose mission it was to bring others into relationship with God, and to see them whole and thriving.

That is our mission, in his name – to be Mother Trees who heal, feed and sustain other members of the forest.

That is what we’re about in Tending Our Soil, gaining clarity about just what kind of trees we are, what is the nature of the forests in which we thrive, and how we might better join God in healing, feeding and sustaining this forest.

Those are questions we ask as Christ Church. They're also for us to answer.
What kind of tree are you? Would you like to be?
What kind of forest are you a part of?
Where are you drawing nourishment?
Where are you not getting enough nutrients, or feeling dry?
Who might have those for you – and who might you be called to share yours with?

Certainly, we can be providing more for each other through
the spiritual practices we take up and share with each other.
Our small groups can be networks for giving and receiving spiritual sustenance
and support for living. Please let me know if you'd like to be in a small group
meeting weekly, online or in person.
God has life for us. We have life for each other, and for this weary world.

At the very end of the Bible, we have a tree standing by water. Revelation 22:1-2.
*Listen: Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal,
flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street
of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of
fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the
healing of the nations.*

That's us, my friends. The Spirit is the river and we are mighty trees,
a forest of saints, and our leaves are for the healing of the nations. **Amen.**

THE GOSPEL

John 15:12-17

'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you.

And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.