

July 1, 2018

Rev. Dr. Mark Lewis from St. Andrews Presbyterian Church, Kitchener led off the 2018 Lake Joseph Community Church calendar of services with a sermon titled "Being in the Presence of Trees". As we come to worship on the shores of Lake Joseph, we are surrounded by a forest of beautiful trees - an environment of peace and majesty. Rev. Lewis reminded us that the Christian Church has had a profound reverence for trees and forests and all they represent and he spoke of how trees can teach us a bit about compassion, community and hope

He told a story of a young man in Japan who was anxious and depressed and suffering physically with high blood pressure and fatigue from his fast paced and competitive life. His doctor wrote a prescription which the pharmacist couldn't fill. The prescription read "You need to be in the presence of trees. Go for a walk in the forest". This prescription is a piece of ancient wisdom known as *shrin yoku* or forest bathing. The idea is to walk slowly in the presence of trees and forget all about what is on your schedule of things to do or the issues that are stressing you. Some of the benefit may be for physical reasons. Trees release substances called phytoncides that are volatile organic compounds with anti-bacterial properties which have beneficial effects for humans.

However, there are important psychological benefits from being in the presence of trees. Rev Lewis reminded us that starting with the industrial revolution, there has been a loss of meaningful social interactions in community and family life because of the busyness and competitiveness of life. Christians are commanded by Jesus to live in loving communities and to care for one another. In John 13:34 Jesus simply states "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another". The fast pace of our modern world makes it difficult to even find time to be loving. So, it is not surprising that many Christian authors and hymn writers have been "tree lovers" and have carried us back through their writings and lyrics to the peaceful uplifting environment of forests. Henry David Thoreau went to Walden Pond saying "I went to the woods because I wish to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what they had to teach". Carl Gustave Boberg wrote "How great Thou" which contains the uplifting lines "When through the woods and forest glades I wander, and hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees, When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur, and hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze". Luella Cole wrote "Birds are singing, woods are ringing".

Although these writers created their works in the mid 1800's, we learned that this wisdom of walking among the trees far predates this time. There is a long tradition in the Jewish faith of celebrating trees with holy days that mark the birthday of the trees! Called Tu b'Shevat, this is a celebration extending over 15 days during which Psalms are read daily about trees. Each of the trees teaches about a quality of God – an upright date tree stands for justice, the bending willow teaches about humility and the blossoming apple tree reminds us to appreciate the beauty of the present moment. There are many references in Hebrew Scriptures to trees. Isaiah 55, says the trees

shout for joy to God; 1 Chronicle 16:33, the trees sing for joy to the Lord and in Psalm 19 the trees clap their hands with joy to God.

So as we walk towards Lake Joseph Community Church, Rev. Lewis encouraged us to pause and feel the deep sense of peace and joy from trees, to practice shin yoku, forest bathing and then to be thankful to be alive and in God's presence. Be thankful that you have the opportunity to be in the presence of trees in Muskoka and to use this opportunity to seek what is truly important in life through God's Holy Spirit.