

## Being in the Presence of Trees

Preached by Mark Lewis on Sunday, June 1, 2018, Lake Joseph Community Church

There are a hundred reasons to love worshiping at Lake Joseph Community Church: The warmth and faith of the gathered people, the sense of the presence of God's Holy Spirit, the music, the beauty and simplicity of the building. Among the many reasons that I have for loving this place is that this is the church that is built in the presence of trees. The presence of trees is a powerful and significant reality that we should think about today.

When I help non-churched people to arrange a funeral for a loved one, I ask them if there is any scripture they would like. They struggle for a bit and then say, "Is there a passage about green fields and a lake, and lying down beside the lake?" Of course they are asking for the twenty-third Psalm, a poem about finding and trusting God in the beauty of nature. Even if they haven't been to church in a hundred years they remember the Psalm about God's presence in nature.

When I ask if they have any favorite hymn, they struggle again, but will invariably say, "Is there a song about the woods and the forests and birds singing? And, of course, they are asking for Carl Gustave Boberg's "How Great Thou Art" which contains the 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."

The Christian Church, and the whole Jewish tradition before it, has a profound reverence for trees, for woods and forests, and all that they represent. And post-modern humanity craves the goodness, the beauty and the healing that is made available through being in the presence of trees. Our lives are so fast and so disconnected that we live with a sense of fear, scarcity and insecurity. Maybe the trees can teach us a bit about compassion, community and hope.

In 1982 a young man in Japan went to his elderly Doctor in a sadly deteriorated state. He was emotionally broken; anxious, stressed, depressed. He was physically beaten with high blood pressure, elevated heart rate and lack of energy. The Doctor listened to the story of his fast paced, competitive life and all his stress, and then wrote him a prescription. Without looking at it the man took the prescription to his pharmacist and handed it over the counter.

The pharmacist handed it back saying, "I am not sure what this is." The Doctor's prescription simply said, "You need to be in the presence of trees. Go for a walk in the forest." The young man was smart enough to see that there might be some deep wisdom in what the old Doctor said. He began to visit the local forest, to walk slowly in it, to breath the forest air, to be in the presence of trees – and his physical and emotional health were greatly improved.

That event marked the rediscovery of an ancient wisdom known as *shinrin yoku* or forest bathing. It is not hiking, because hiking implies goals and a certain pace. You are not allowed to wear your Fitbit, because that implies the need for accomplishment. It is just walking slowly and being in the presence of trees. When was the last time you did something without a schedule, without a goal, without time-constraints? These are things that we have forgotten.

There are many reasons why *shinrin yoku* or forest bathing or being in the presence of trees is so effective. Trees produce phytoncides which are antimicrobial, allelochemic, volatile organic compounds intended to protect the tree, but they produce an abundance which permeates the forest air and has benefits for human beings. That's one of the reasons why we love the Muskoka forests, why I love the pine trees in Nova Scotia and the cedar trees in Tobermory.

But there are theological reasons beyond the physical reasons. At the beginning of this sermon I spoke about non-churched people who crave the presence of God in nature. The Christian tradition has produced many tree lovers,

and strangely, many of them began to crave the presence of trees during the same era in human history. Carl Gustave Boberg wrote “How Great Thou Art” in 1885. Luella Cole wrote “Birds are singing, woods are ringing” in 1870.

It is not a random coincidence that that era produced so many souls yearning for the presence of trees. And it was not just a church phenomenon. It was in 1845 that Henry David Thoreau went down to Walden Pond saying, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what they had to teach.” All of these souls were responding to the industrial revolution which reached its peak in 1840.

The industrial revolution, for all the good that it brought us, has also brought us a severe loss of community, family life, connectedness and meaningful social interactions. The industrial revolution contributed to humanity’s tendency to be fiercely competitive and to place success and accomplishment above relationship and community. It is at this point that the relationship between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Japanese art of *shinrin yoku* come together.

Jesus wants us – or rather commands us – to live in loving communities, to put our relationships above worldly things, to dedicate our lives to caring for each other. In [John 13:34](#) Jesus says, “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” In [Acts 2:43](#) God says, “All the believers continued together in close fellowship and shared their belongings with one another.” The fast pace and competitiveness of the post-modern world makes love difficult.

We live with a constant sense of scarcity – “Do I have enough in my RSVP? If I take a day off will I lose my job to a younger, more ambitious person? If I let anyone know that I am going to relax will they think that I am lazy?” Our constant striving to achieve leaves us disconnected, dehumanized and lonely. We are separated from God and from humanity by endless layers of technology and industry. In the end, such separation makes us sick in body, mind and spirit.

I have told you about *shinrin yoku* and Luella Cole’s great hymn “Birds are singing, woods are ringing,” and about Thoreau on Walden Pond, but the wisdom of walking among the trees far predates any of these people. In the Jewish faith there is a special holy day to mark the birthday of the trees! It is called Tu b’Shevat, and in 2018 was celebrated on the evening of February 12 and the whole day of February 13.

The celebration of Tu b’Shevat calls on us to read 15 Psalms about trees over the first 15 days of the season of Shevat. Each of the trees teaches us some new quality from God, e.g. – The upright date tree teaches us to speak up for justice; the willow teaches us about need; and the blossoming apple tree teaches us about the beauty of the present moment. The greatest lesson of the trees is that they are constantly reaching up, a burst of life moving towards the sky.

Hebrew scripture teaches many things about trees, e.g. – In [Isaiah 55](#) the trees shout for joy to God; in [Chronicles 16:33](#) the trees sing for joy to the Lord; in [Psalm 19](#) the trees clap their hands with joy to God; in [Judges 9:8](#) the trees converse and decide which tree will be the king of trees. Some Jewish mystics refer to God as the Tree of Life or the Living Tree, whose roots, seeds, branches and leaves are the source of the web of life in which we live.

Jesus carried on the tradition of revering trees during his ministry. He calls his disciples to observe the fig tree, the mustard tree, the fruit trees, the green tree, the dry tree and the olive tree. Our Lord walked slowly among the trees and understood their wisdom. It was beneath an olive tree that he bowed his head and prayed before he was arrested. Walking among the trees always brings us back to a sense that we need to be firmly rooted, but also, always reaching up.

And so, as you walk towards Lake Joseph Community Church, you feel a deep sense of peace and joy. There are

many reasons for that, but one of the reasons will always be that as you walk up to this church you must walk through the trees, you must practice *shinrin yoku*; you join your soul with the soul of David who fell asleep beneath the palm trees in the oasis Engedi, and as he slept beneath the trees a word came to him, “The Lord is my shepherd...”

As you walk towards Lake Joseph Community Church, you see the roots of the trees, you see the sun dappled by the green branches; you breathe in those antimicrobial, allelochemic, organic compounds; you are grounded again. The stress drains away; your blood pressure and heart rate stabilize; you remember again what life is about; you want to be connected to your fellow human beings and to God, and your soul is ready to worship.

In the week that is to come I pray you will find time to forest bathe. I pray that you will walk slowly among the trees, not with a goal in mind, not at any pace. Just walk and breathe and feel the presence of the trees. Let your heart and soul slow down. When the trees have calmed your soul then say in your heart, “O God, I am thankful to be alive, I am thankful to be in your presence, send me your Holy Spirit and teach me again what is important.

When you go from here today, take the wisdom of the trees with you. Hold the image of the trees in your heart even if you are going back to downtown Toronto. Remember to be grounded. Remember to be connected. Put your relationships ahead of all material things. Trust in God for your future. Let the trees help you to get your priorities straight. And always be thankful that you have been in the presence of trees.