

Second Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 6
Year A

Beneath the Trees

Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7); Psalm 116:1, 10-17; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8(9-23)

Where do you go to encounter God? Do you have a favorite place for divine inspiration? Some of you will instinctually think of going to church. Another way to phrase the question is, “Where do you go when you really need to think and make a decision?” Perhaps some of you embrace nature by going to the park. Others prefer being by a body of water such as a pond, lake, river, or ocean.

Abraham sits by the oaks of Mamre when the Lord appears to him in Genesis 18:1. We do not know why he sat under the trees, but perhaps he needed to think about and heal from the covenant he made with God at the end of chapter 17. Abraham encounters God and receives a divine message under these oak trees.

Trees have been and continue to be important in Christians’ worship and spiritual lives. Some enslaved African Americans in the 1800s met to worship God under a canopy of trees commonly called brush arbors or hush harbors.¹ The faithful practiced Christianity in this holy and hidden manner. Many historically African American churches today trace their founding to believers gathering to worship God under these brush arbors. Today in Ethiopia, some Orthodox Christians worship God within “church forests.” Churches or monasteries sit in the center of a forest that ranges in size from five to a thousand acres. The clergy and laity believe the tree canopy shading them prevents prayers from being lost to the sky. Some of these churches are more than 1,500 years old.²

Abraham’s encounter with three visitors changed his life and life of his wife, Sarah. Both Abraham and Sarah show hospitality, inviting these unexpected guests to rest and eat under the oaks of Mamre. One of the visitors speaks to Abraham, saying, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son” (Genesis 18:10). Sarah laughs when she hears this as she stands inside the tent. Scripture continues, “The Lord said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh, and say, “Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?” Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son”’ (Genesis 18:13-14). Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90 when their first child together, Isaac, entered the world. Nothing was too wonderful for the Lord when Abraham and

¹ <https://www.ohio.edu/infocus/hushharbors/> Accessed May 21, 2017.

² <http://magazine.africageographic.com/weekly/issue-43/ethiopias-church-forests/#sthash.nRGaU73U.dpuf> Accessed May 21, 2017

Sarah received the manifestation of God's promise. Abraham and Sarah had a religious and life changing experience connected firmly with the oak tree canopied landscape that sustained them.³

American theologian the Rev. Frederick Buechner wrote in his book *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."⁴ The Ethiopian church forests I mentioned earlier are examples of Buechner's quote. Deforestation impacts the environment in many areas of the world, including Ethiopia. Church forests provide important ecosystem services to local people, including fresh water, pollinators, honey, and shade—and they also carry spiritual significance. Natural scientists across the world are partnering with Ethiopian clergy to help preserve these forests. Locals often clear the forests for agriculture, timber, and firewood, and to use wood to repair church structures.⁵ Scientists, clergy, and the laity are working together to make a difference. They are teaching Sunday School children culturally sensitive solutions to help reverse deforestation which will completely deplete these forests in a decade if the current rate continues. This is the place where their deep gladness for God meets the world's deep need.

Churches in the United States are meeting one of the world's deep needs by assessing their impact on the local environment. Recycling programs, energy audits, water conservation efforts, and energy consumption reduction are helping congregations decrease any negative impacts on land, water, and air. One midwestern Episcopal Cathedral has a rain garden at the center of a labyrinth. A rain garden collects rainwater runoff from parking lots and roofs, preventing water carrying pollutants from flowing into streams and rivers. A labyrinth is a meditation tool used by Christians as a walking prayer to receive insight and open us to God.⁶

This world needs more people of faith thinking about the human impact on the world. It is unimaginable to think of not having nature to enjoy and make alive our connection with God. Each of us can do something.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, in giving us dominion over things on earth, you made us fellow workers in your creation: Give us wisdom and reverence so to use the resources of nature that no one may suffer from our abuse of them, and that generations yet to come may continue to praise you for your bounty; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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³ *Excursus: Abraham*. Harrelson, Walter. *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, Abingdon Press, 2003, p. 56.

⁴ Buechner, Frederick. *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* Collins, 1973 p. 95.

⁵ <http://magazine.africageographic.com/weekly/issue-43/ethiopias-church-forests/> Accessed May 21, 2017.

⁶ <http://www.cathedralchurchofstpaul.org/features/labyrinth-rain-garden/> Accessed May 21, 2017.

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