

Our scripture today is from Mark 4:26-34 and Psalm 92.

Mark 4:26-34 – the Message:

Then Jesus said, “God’s kingdom is like seed thrown on a field by a man who then goes to bed and forgets about it. The seed sprouts and grows—he has no idea how it happens. The earth does it all without his help: first a green stem of grass, then a bud, then the ripened grain. When the grain is fully formed, he reaps—harvest time!

“How can we picture God’s kingdom? What kind of story can we use? It’s like a pine nut. When it lands on the ground it is quite small as seeds go, yet once it is planted it grows into a huge pine tree with thick branches. Eagles nest in it.”

With many stories like these, he presented his message to them, fitting the stories to their experience and maturity. He was never without a story when he spoke. When he was alone with his disciples, he went over everything, sorting out the tangles, untying the knots.

Our psalm today is Psalm 92. Psalm 92 is a psalm dedicated to the Sabbath – and, thus, most likely was spoken and prayed as part of the liturgy – a common prayer said together or sung by the cantor in the synagogue.

A Sabbath Song

What a beautiful thing, God, to give thanks,
to sing an anthem to you, the High God!

To announce your love each daybreak, sing your faithful presence all through the night,
Accompanied by dulcimer and harp, the full-bodied music of strings.
You made me so happy, God I saw your work and I shouted for joy.

How magnificent your work, God!

How profound your thoughts!

Dullards never notice what you do; fools never do get it.

When the wicked popped up like weeds
and all the evil men and women took over,

You mowed them down,
finished them off once and for all.

You, God, are High and Eternal.

Look at your enemies, God! Look at your enemies—ruined! Scattered to the winds, all
those hirelings of evil!

But you’ve made me strong as a charging bison,
you’ve honored me with a festive parade.

The sight of my critics going down is still fresh,
the rout of my malicious detractors.

My ears are filled with the sounds of promise:

“Good people will prosper like palm trees,

Grow tall like Lebanon cedars;

transplanted to God’s courtyard, they’ll grow tall in the presence of God, lithe and green,
virile still in old age.”

Such witnesses to upright God!

My Mountain, my huge, holy Mountain!

Many of us experience heightened spirituality through our senses – especially through what we experience outside. Seeing, hearing, tasting, touching smelling our world around us brings us closer to understanding and appreciating the One who created all things. Even when you have no green appendages (let alone a thumb), and are allergic to everything outside, even then, I believe the created world leaves you profoundly moved.

The peony is a marvellous creation. It is an easy plant to grow – but we have found that it matters where it is planted. Just the perfect amount of sun, rain, shade and just the right kind of soil make for a plant that can be grown and divided and established and redivided and grown until it’s well over 100 years old.

Cathedral grove is a provincial park on Vancouver Island BC (there’s also one in California) where I first experienced a rainforest. There’s something utterly holy and sacred about a rain-forest – especially in the Pacific Northwest. The hush silence – where you hear only water, water dripping from the trees and the ferns, or water running through the rivers to fall later down the stream. The beat of a raven’s wing, and the height and breadth of the ancient trees stirs my soul to awe at its creator.

In our scripture from Mark, which we read in the Message, Eugene Peterson reinterprets the parable of the mustard seed into the parable of the pine-nut. It is important to know that Eugene Peterson studied scripture and wrote much of the Message at his house just south of Kalispell on Flathead Lake in Montana – the pine and the eagle would have been more familiar to him than the dryland mustard, and certainly more formidable. I believe this reinterpretation doesn’t take away from the meaning of the text.

Both Jesus’ parables (the mustard plant, and the farmer who plants a seed) and the metaphor of a tree planted in the garden of God - found in the psalm speak of the mystery of God’s Kingdom growing within us and within our community and our world. We do not know how it happens or how something so little can become so big, but what we do know is that it matters where things are planted. This imagery is quite profound, I do want to address the Mark text more – however, for today we will mainly look at the imagery in the psalm.

Our psalm begins:

What a beautiful thing, God, to give thanks,
to sing an anthem to you, the High God!
To announce your love each daybreak,
sing your faithful presence all through the night,
Accompanied by dulcimer and harp,
the full-bodied music of strings.

You made me so happy, God, I saw your work and I shouted for joy.

We too cannot help to extend our praise to the Creator. The psalmist sings out in exuberant praise because of the works of God's hand - God's creation is marvellous and we delight living in it.

Don't we see around us now? It is GOOD to give thanks to the LORD! Many of you too, I'm sure, spontaneously find yourselves bursting into praise to God - through a song that pops into your head, or scripture that comes to mind. Finding wonder in God's creation is an act of praise. Delighting in what our eyes take in - our ears hear when we explore our world is praising God. I encourage you to notice the mood of your heart when you step outside and notice the wonder of God's world.

Our tendency is to skip over the verses in the middle - verses 5-11 - after all, we don't really want to sing about dullards and fools and how the wicked are doomed. But the tough bits of the psalms are important too - just like all the tough bits in our lives.

When the negative stuff is left unsaid, we don't acknowledge it and it festers about until the bacteria has spread and springs up like a boil and the lancing is more painful than it should have been had we just cleansed the wound. Anyway, that's all to say that we miss the meaning of the psalm - the prayer - if we don't look at the psalm as a whole.

In the second part of the psalm - verses 5-9 - the psalmist recognizes that things in this world really aren't fair...and calls the people to a closer examination of what's going on... "The dullard and the fools can't figure it out." What can't they figure out? Well, that the wicked - the selfish who prey upon God's people and do not consider the works of God's hands as sacred - the wicked often seem to prosper. And yet LOOK, the psalmist reminds us, the prosperity of the wicked is like that of the grass (I like to say, like tender perennials): luscious and flourishing at first, yet short-lived and temporary, without endurance, fading and wilting when things get tough.

In contrast to the prospering wicked, the Psalmist declares, "you, O Lord, are on high and eternal" (Psalm 92:8). God doesn't disappear; God's presence doesn't fade; God is still as glorious as he was from the beginning.

In the third part of the psalm – verses 10-15 the psalmist descriptively compares the righteous to long-lived trees planted and flourishing in God’s Garden. At one level, the symbolism is straightforward. Trees are symbolic of enduring life and fertility. They are even longer lived than peonies. How appropriate, then, that this text declares that those who are right with God will enjoy a similar fruitful life. The righteous are deliberately placed, nourished, and protected, like the 3 peony bushes in my family. Because of this care, they are able to flourish.

I’m reminded of the parable of the sower that we heard today – who plants the seed and doesn’t really know whether it’ll grow...but hopes it does. And like the other parable of the sower that many of us know, where the sower just scatters the seeds and lets them drop as they will – and some rests here and there – some in good and some in bad soil.

This psalm is different than these parables. There are no mysterious secrets of seeds here. No. In this psalm the righteous are DELIBERATELY planted and tended and cared for – and they flourish.

Why do the righteous flourish? Because their roots grow deep. In Jeremiah 17:8 we read, “They are like trees that are planted along the riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water. Such trees are not bothered by heat, or worried by long months of drought”. In essence, when we are planted in Yahweh’s garden we are purposefully planted in places where we are able to access what we need to grow and thrive.

I don’t need to tell you all about the necessity of rain – or of sun. They are so important to the production of good fruit. However, I do know that extremes in rain or sun will do damage to the crops and the psyche of the farmers.

Too much water rots or washes away the roots and the stalks, – too shallow “watered down” faith – leads to moldy plants and watery fruit. Too much sun burns the leaves and leaves a trail of scorch marks in every encounter. Too little water the plant shrivels and dries, not enough sustenance to keep going.

We know that life doesn’t always give us what we need to grow and thrive. In fact, often when we’re faced with problems with our jobs, relationships, health, our family or money issues, and when that happens then we tend to contract – to pull in. I know I have this past year – when we were in Canada and upon our return in this crazy pandemic life. It is an instinctual way to protect ourselves – physically and spiritually – from the chaos of our lives. We may pull in our roots and branches and limit the fruit we produce.

But, here’s the deal, when we are planted in God’s garden we ARE not alone. Even when we pull in, our roots are still intertwined with the roots of other trees and together form an underground support system that sustains each individual tree. When one tree is flagging,

the other trees send nutrients through their roots connecting to other trees connected to other trees all connected to the water flowing through God's Garden.

THIS is why we need each other. We are deliberately planted TOGETHER in the garden of God and our roots run deep and together. We NEED each other to help us when we feel broken and barren and afraid and withered; hungry and thirsty; young and old.

Jo Ann Taylor writes, "*We need the family of God.* I need you, you need me. We are stronger, and blessed, and encouraged because our roots support each other. We need one another. When you are isolated, you are vulnerable to the enemy. But when you are planted firmly in the [Garden of God], you are part of a great forest that supports you."

One of the best things that I learned in Seminary – and I don't even remember who told me this first, when I was grieving the loss of my mother – when you can't pray, know that we are praying for you. Your prayers and our prayers are one. You are not alone.

I want to go back to something I mentioned near the beginning of my sermon - that this psalm is a psalm dedicated to the Sabbath. Sabbath is more than praising God, it is more than resting. Sabbath is, more than anything, practicing and trusting living in God's presence. God plants us and we decide to stay. A life in God's presence tending to our relationship with each other and with God will ensure a life of faithful vitality.

The righteous are planted – deliberately planted – in the house of the LORD. They're not uprooted, they don't yank themselves out as soon as any little bug comes and wiggles its way into their closed blossoms. They are planted and they take root – and they are nurtured by the Word of God and connected to one another.

Of course, growing isn't the only thing that a tree does. And while it's wonderful that we are interconnected and that our roots run deep into the water in God's garden, we also, like trees, become what we eat. When and where trees are planted helps determine the quality of fruit. Psalm 92 says that even in old age, the trees are still vigorous and producing good fruit.

We know the fruit of the Spirit – name them with me: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Even at old age, those who are planted in the garden of God produce these fruit. Taylor writes, "...these fruits are not just for you, ...your love blesses other people, and your joy is contagious, and your peace is attractive, and your faithfulness builds relationships, and suddenly you realize "I am planted, and I am making a difference. I'm getting some roots here."

You see, Menno Mennonite Church isn't just a building where we go. It isn't MCA, it isn't just where we see our friends. We own this build, true, but our community is claimed by God.

Menno Mennonite Church is a plot in the great Garden of God and God, not we, are the gardeners. Our job in this garden is to get our feet good and dirty and good and wet. Our job is to get tangled up with each other – pushing and pulling each other into deeper faith, love and hope when all seems lost.

Our job is to support and find joy in the young saplings – our little ones in the congregation. They are always watching us. They are the most recently planted – perhaps even the last that were gently carried in the hands of the Gardener. The young can tell us of the tenderness of the creator – their fruit, while immature, is still pushed out with such wild joy. To intimidate and break this spirit is a sin and has lasting effects on the little ones and their love for the church and God's people.

Our job, as mature trees, is to bend with the wind of the world. Several weeks ago in a strong wind we lost large branches from one of the maple trees in our front yard. A healthy tree – like a healthy Christian – can remain rooted and connected and still be flexible even though several immovable parts may need to be pruned. The mature trees bend with the wind of the world – if we are too stiff we break. Mature trees protect the young saplings from the wind of the world and provide nourishment through their good fruit.

Our job, as “senior” trees is to produce the best fruit (after all we've had good practice making fruit) and to welcome into our strong and safe branches many a lost soul. As senior trees, we have witnessed the whole life of the Garden – the changing seasons, the times of drought and the times of growth. Our job is to remind the garden of the promises of the great gardener, the goodness of the great gardener. Even after you die, your roots and your branches still nourish and support the life of the garden.

Jesus said, the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed – the kingdom of God is like a pine-nut – the tiny seed grows into a huge plant where even birds come and nest in her branches. Our psalm says we are like trees transplanted into the garden of God.

God's is the soil, the water, the air, the sun. We, the church, the kingdom of God, are collectively the orchard. How might we shelter and support each other? What is the quality of our fruit?

Perhaps these are questions we can ponder this week. How might you shelter and support a young one? What kind of fruit are you producing? How are you offering God's fresh water to those who are thirsty or in need of God's cool healing?