

Tending your soil

First Sunday of Advent, 11/28/21

“In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David.”

“Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near.”

When Advent makes its advent each year, the church turns away from the year past and toward a fresh new year. And fresh though it is, Advent is not a time we usually focus on sprouting leaves and new branches. After all, the beginning of our liturgical year, the time leading up to Christmas, coincides with winter, the time when - even here in Austin - green growth slows, leaves brown and drop, and branches are bare.

Nevertheless, on this first Sunday of Advent we have these images from Jeremiah and Jesus - the righteous branch and the sprouting fig tree. These leafy trees are harbingers of hope and the coming of the kingdom of God. They are images of promise.

Imagining these new branches and new leaves take me back to our collective experience last winter and spring - the deep freeze in February and the long wait to see if our gardens would recover.

I have a route that I walk through my neighborhood that takes me by two huge fig trees that grow in an empty lot. In years past, they have been so full of fruit that all of us who walk by take some and there is always enough, more than enough. For us and for the animals.

But after the deep freeze, those trees looked more barren than in past years, and they were surrounded by other trees and gardens

looking similarly traumatized. Walking by them reminded me on a daily basis of the harsh experience we had all been through - we humans as well as the trees.

Would they pull through? It felt like if they did it would be the final sign that we would all pull through the other tough experiences in our lives. A pandemic, civil disruption, family discord...

So every time I walked by those trees I looked for signs of life. And finally they came. Later than usual, but still. Small leaves started to pop out of the branches. Not all of the branches, the tree had been scarred by the harsh winter, but there were enough leaves (and eventually fruit) to know that the tree had survived. It felt a bit like a personal triumph, because lots of us had experienced the same trauma that the tree was recovering from - so the tree's healing felt a little like our healing.

This is the kind of promise and healing that Jeremiah and Jesus are talking about in our scripture readings today. Both are speaking to people who have been and are experiencing collective trauma.

In Jeremiah's case it is the exiles in Babylon, who have watched their city fall; they have been taken from their homes to a strange land. Jesus' words speak to people living under Roman occupation and the feeling of being aliens in their own land. And in both cases, Jeremiah and Jesus use images from nature that point to new life emerging from the old, new life springing forth from trauma.

There is more to the promise of the branch and the leaves, though, than the coming of a new season. The source of hope comes from what has already been established. There is already something there that grounds the promise of the future in the root and soil of our past.

Advent is a time when we look toward the promise of God that comes with Christ, and also a time when we prepare for that coming by remembering our heritage and the community to whom the promises were made and then passed on to us. It is a time when we tend the soil of our faith so that new things can grow.

Writer and gardener Fred Bahnson, who founded a faith-based community garden, observes that the garden is the oldest metaphor in our spiritual tradition. In Eden, God created humankind from the soil and then commissioned us to tend it.

“Caring for the soil,” he writes, “is our first divinely appointed vocation.”

He describes the soil in his own community garden as an ecosystem of bacteria, fungi, protozoa, nematodes, and earthworms. He tends it every bit as much as he tends the seeds he will plant there. Soil is life that gives life.

If it is literal soil that gives life to the tree and the branch and the new leaf, then we should ask what is the metaphorical soil that gives our faith new branches and new leaves?

Jeremiah connects the new branch to the promises God made to Israel and Judah, he connects it to justice and righteousness. He connects it to David. The soil in which the new branch grows is deeply rooted in the history of God’s relationship with these people. It is rooted in Creation, Liberation, and Desert Wandering.

We could say that for Jeremiah, the soil in which the branch will spring up is the covenant relationship between God and the people of God, the covenant that prioritizes love of neighbor as the foundation of community.

Jesus connects the new leaves to the nearness of the kingdom of God and promises for the future that are grounded in history. He points to signs in all of creation - in the sun, moon, and stars, between nations, in the roaring of the sea. The soil from which this green leaf sprouts connects all of creation with its Creator, it is the stuff from which we are made. Soil connects ground and sky and water; life and death.

As a gardener tends the soil in a garden, preparing it each year to nurture growth, we enter each Advent tending the soil of our faith, preparing ourselves to receive the gift of Christ and nourish the kingdom values of justice and righteousness.

Like the soil in a community garden, or the ground in which a winter-ravaged fig tree grows, the soil of our faith contains the elements that make new life possible. Instead of bacteria, fungi, and earthworms, we have Story, prayer, and community.

Healthy spiritual soil starts by grounding us in the story of salvation. The story of God's relationship with humanity, and especially with the people of Israel, tell us all we need to know about the God we worship. Tending the soil of our faith includes knowing and studying our story as found in scripture, understanding how it relates to our lives today, and seeing in it the promise of God's kingdom.

To that rich, deep, layered soil we add our prayers, which aerate the Story with our own longings, traumas, hopes, and fears. Every prayer we say - in private or in a congregation - is a communication between us and God, between God and us. These prayers, our breath that opens up communication between us and God, between each of us, brings our current longings into the Story and allows new prayers to emerge.

Community is an essential component of our spiritual soil. We were made to be connected to other believers and to share the

love of God we've experienced with all of creation - including other human beings. Soil enriched by our Story and aerated by our prayers welcomes all. Community - the joining of loved ones and strangers - provides the diversity of elements needed to enrich our Story and our Prayers. Community includes our relationships with each other and with God. Community is the very nature of the Trinity - the unity of Father, Son, and Spirit. Whether it is feeding a hungry stranger or a member of your own household, the care we show each other is a way of tending our faith.

“Caring for the soil is our first divinely appointed vocation.”

Between now and Christmas, we will have time to tend the soil of our faith by retelling our story, lifting up our prayers, and sharing what we know and what we have with a community of loved ones and strangers. From that soil a branch will emerge, a new leaf will unfold. These are signs that God's promises to us - made to us long before we were born - made out of love for us - these promises are being fulfilled.

AMEN