

Sermon for Sunday, July 7, 2024
Forest Sunday

Genesis 2:4b-22
Acts 17:22-28
John 3:1-16

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

As a part of our sermon series on creation today is Forest Sunday. Today I am going to talk about a peculiar tree in Utah and draw comparisons between the characteristics of this tree and our hope for eternal life as followers of Jesus.

There is a tree in Utah that is called *Pando*. If you or I were to walk through the area where this tree grows we would think that we were seeing a forest containing thousands of individual trees that happen to be of the same species. Imagine walking through a forest of all pine trees or maple trees or a grove of oak trees. People who study plants will tell you that a forest of oak trees, for example, are related but not biologically identical. *Pando* is different. It turns out that it is actually one tree with an enormous single root system that extends underground over 105 acres. It is from this vast network of roots that sprouts come up: botanists call each sprout a *ramet*. Each ramet grows so large that the untrained eye would consider each a unique and individual tree. But that's not an accurate way to describe *Pando*. At this time there are about 47,000 ramets that are genetically identical and all connected by the common root system. *Pando* is considered the largest tree in the world. (As opposed to the General Sherman sequoia which is the largest *single stem* tree in the world.)

If we take the idea of these ramets that sprout up from a single root system and extend it as a metaphor to humans we have some interesting ways to think about our relationship with God. For the next few minutes we are going to consider the connections between *Pando*, *Pando's* ramets, and humans utilizing our Scripture text for today.

One connection utilizes the creation story out of Genesis 2. This creation story says that God "breathed into the human's nostrils the *breath of life*. God breathed into us; God's breath filled humanity's lungs not only with life but also with the Holy Spirit.

We humans may think we are independent persons with no need of God. But in doing so we overlook the creator of our world as described in the rest of the Genesis account. God created us and whether we want to admit it or not we truly do rely on God for all of our needs.

Returning to *Pando*, and the "trees." These ramets receive the water and nutrients that they need to thrive through their root system. In the same way we humans receive much of what we need through our root system: and that system isn't our house and our work/paycheck and our education. That root system is God. Through God's grace we receive all that we need. (Which includes but is not limited to the astonishing medical advances that have been made over the last 75 years: think of the joint replacements and the cancer treatments and the possibility of lung, and heart, and kidney, and bone marrow transplants and treatments for diabetes and other chronic diseases—these advances have been made by humans who have been inspired by God's Holy Spirit to make the world a better place and many of us have been beneficiaries of these advances.) Our root system is God. Through God's grace we receive all that we need.

Back to *Pando*: Scientists are very unsure about the age of *Pando*. They know that each ramet lives between 100 and 130 years. But the question is more broadly about the entire organism because it's the roots that maintain the life of this tree. Some scientists have even considered what might happen if there was an enormous forest fire that burned up most of the ramets. They say that part of the reason why the tree has continued to exist for such a long time is because of the vast amount of moisture that each ramet contains. But more significantly, if a fire should come roaring through and damage some or all of the trees the root system will not be damaged and will provide what is needed for new ramets/trees to sprout and grow once more.

Yellowstone National Park experienced terrible wildfires in 1988. Pictures of the destruction were unearthly. Some years later our family went to the park and were witness to the new growth that was starting to come back. Yellowstone was never completely dead of course, and new life was returning in astonishing ways.

Whether it is the speculative destruction of *Pando* or the actual destruction in Yellowstone I see a parallel with Jesus; his life, death, and resurrection. The principalities and powers of the world thought that they had rid themselves of a nuisance who was upsetting the power structures of the world when they crucified

Jesus. It looked like the end when this man died on a cross on a Friday afternoon in early spring about 2000 years ago. But it wasn't the end. Death and destruction, principalities and powers did not win. It was actually the beginning of a new hope for all who believe in Jesus and in the power of God.

For if God has the power to create as described in the Genesis account; if God has the power to breathe life into dirt; then God has the power to bring about new life to all of us. God is like our underground root structure just waiting to burst up into new life in unexpected and surprising ways.

The more I consider trees in the forest, the more I realize that it takes a long time for those trees to grow to maturity. Pando didn't come into existence overnight. Scientists think that the root system is probably several thousand years old. The General Sherman sequoia in California is about 2500 years old and even the oak tree in my backyard is probably 150 to 200 years old. We need to take a lesson from these trees and realize that their slow growing lives can provide inspiration for us humans.

Beth Clark is quoted as saying: "I've noticed something about people who make a difference in the world: They hold the unshakable conviction that individuals are extremely important, that every life matters. They get excited over one smile. They are willing to feed one stomach, educate one mind, and treat one wound. They aren't determined to revolutionize the world all at once; they're satisfied with small changes. Over time, though, the small changes add up. Sometimes they even transform cities and nations, and yes, the world."

Yes, Beth, you are right. Just as one acorn turns into a mighty oak or a single pine cone drops a seed that produces a sequoia, or one strand of root produces a ramet from Pando, so Jesus made a difference in our world. Individuals were important to him. Every life mattered to him. He was willing to feed one stomach, educate one mind, and heal one wound. Did he know he would revolutionize the world all at once? Probably not. But over time, the small changes he made added up. Small opportunities, that over time changed the world.

Beth Clark