

## ***DOWN BY THE RIVERSIDE***

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26

***“Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,  
whose trust is the Lord.  
They shall be like a tree planted by water...”***  
Jeremiah 16:7-8a

He was retired military: safe and secure after twenty-plus years in the service, living on a comfortable pension. He had achieved a standard of living higher than his parents’ wildest dreams. By all accounts, he should have been supremely happy; but he was not. Something very important was missing from his life.

Alex Haley longed to know where he came from. And so he set out to discover his roots.

Everyone he told about his quest said he was crazy. How could an African-American, a descendant of slaves, trace his family history back across the ocean? There were few written records of black folk in America’s courthouses. The official line was that slaves were not people, but property — just one step up from livestock. Most of them had no last name — and if they did, it was the name of their master.

But Alex Haley had listened well to the stories of his family, the lore passed from generation to generation. He had heard tell of a man who did have his own name: Kunta Kinte: captured by slavers, torn away from his homeland in West Africa. Impelled by the power of that name, generations old — and by the conviction that there had been a living, breathing human being behind it — Haley managed to do what everyone thought impossible. He traced his family roots back, generation by generation, all the way to Africa. The book he wrote — *Roots* — tells his family's story. It became a bestseller that spawned several television miniseries. It also created a genealogy craze that hasn't died down since.

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Today's lesson from the book of Jeremiah traces a different kind of roots: not the roots of family history, but rather, spiritual roots.

The prophet begins by saying something about the roots of a human life that does not know God:

**Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals  
and make mere flesh their strength,  
whose hearts turn away from the Lord.  
They shall be like a shrub in the desert...  
They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,  
in an uninhabited salt land.**

The roots of a life lived in isolation from God are parched; brittle; lifeless. On the other hand, a life lived close to the Lord grows into a lush and beautiful plant:

**Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,  
whose trust is the Lord.  
They shall be like a tree planted by water,  
sending out its roots by the stream.  
It shall not fear when heat comes,  
and its leaves shall stay green;  
in the year of drought it is not anxious,  
and it does not cease to bear fruit.**

Jeremiah knows whereof he speaks. He lives, after all, in the Middle East — that land of sandy deserts cut through by cool, running rivers. Whether Jordan or Nile, Tigris or Euphrates, those shimmering ribbons of water give life to all the country round about. Beside their banks rise towering trees: date palms, willows, fruit trees of every description. They give up their fruit for human consumption. They offer shade for human pleasure.

Day after day, from the time they were tiny seedlings, those trees have grown alongside the riverbank. As the waters silently flow by, they stretch their branches heavenward. Their trunks have grown solid, over the years, increasing in girth. Their roots have extended outward, turning aside the moist soil: constructing an intricate tangle that anchors the tree in the earth, even on those wild nights when the storm-winds howl. Through the trees' system of vessels and capillaries flows

the water of the river itself — drawn up through its root-system into the trunk, and delivered from there to every leaf-tip.

Listen to these words about trees and how they grow — written by plant biologist Hope Jahren, in her book, *Lab Girl*:

**“Everything is risked in that one moment when the first cells...advance from the seed coat. The root grows down before the shoot grows up, and so there is no possibility for green tissue to make new food for several days or even weeks. Rooting exhausts the very last reserves of the seed. The gamble is everything, and losing means death. The odds are more than a million to one against success.**

**But when it wins, it wins big. If a root finds what it needs, it bulks into a taproot — an anchor that can swell and split bedrock, and move gallons of water daily for years, much more efficiently than any mechanical pump yet invented.... The taproot sends out lateral roots that intertwine with those of the plant next to it, capable of signaling danger, similar to the way that information passes between neurons via their synapses. The surface area of this root system is easily one hundred times greater than that of all the leaves put together. Tear apart everything aboveground —**

**everything — and most plants can still grow rebelliously back from just one intact root.”<sup>1</sup>**

It’s because those trees are “planted by water, sending out roots by the stream” that they’re able not only to survive the scorching noonday heat, but to flourish. Because they tap into a source of life beyond themselves, they are able to live.

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So what can we say about this deeply rooted life, that’s “like a tree planted by water?”

The first thing we can say is that it’s a life lived in relationship. The first tree Jeremiah mentions is hardly a tree at all — so stunted is it by bleak conditions in the “uninhabited salt land.” He calls it not even a tree, but a “shrub.”

The second tree, however — the one he holds up as an example of the godly life — is different. It grows not in the parched desert, but on the riverbank. It exists in relationship with the ever-flowing, ever-nurturing river.

Faithful living, when it comes right down to it, is more a matter of relationship than specific behaviors. True, as Christian we’re called to live

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<sup>1</sup>Hope Jahren, *Lab Girl* (Vintage, 2017), 52-53.

ethically, but that ethical behavior is not where it all begins. What has to come first is a relationship with God.

**“When we read the lives of the saints [writes one scholar], we are struck by a certain large leisure which went hand in hand with a remarkable effectiveness. They were never hurried; they did comparatively few things, and these not necessarily striking or important; and they troubled very little about their influence. Yet they always seemed to hit the mark; every bit of their life told; their simplest actions had a distinction, an exquisiteness that suggested the artist. The reason is not far to seek. Their sainthood lay in their habit of referring the smallest actions to God.”<sup>2</sup>**

But that’s only the half of it. Following closely upon that divine-human relationship is another sort of relationship: life together in the Christian community. Those whose lives are truly holy never go it alone. They live out their life and faith in community.

I’m troubled these days — as perhaps you are, too — by the large numbers of people who identify as Christian, but never feel much compulsion to connect with a worshiping community. Instead, they largely go it alone: maybe connecting with a sermon every now and again on TV or the Internet, saying the occasional prayer, forwarding a social media post that strikes a spiritual chord with them. This, despite the fact that for 20 centuries followers of Jesus have made worship a central part of their lives.

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<sup>2</sup>Gordon MacDonald, *Ordering Your Private World* (Nelson, 2007), 172.

You can read about it in the second chapter of Acts:

**“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.....Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”** (Acts 2:42, 46-47)

Although Jeremiah writes about a single tree, in reality trees seldom go it alone. The tree by the riverbank is surrounded by other trees. Their roots intertwine, giving strength and stability when the storm-winds howl.

You and I are designed for relationship: first with God through Jesus Christ, and second with fellow-believers.

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The second thing I'd like to point out about this Christian life of ours is that our roots run deep. That tree squats on its haunches by the riverbank, watching the water flow by — far more water in a second than it could drink in a day — but the tree can't access that water directly. A tree can't bend down, cup hands together (as you or I can), and take a drink. No, a tree has got to extend its roots, deep down into the earth. Slowly, continuously, it drinks of the life-giving moisture.

Now how do you or I do that (you may be wondering)? We do it, first of all, through prayer: through being in conversation with God, on a regular basis. We do

it also through contemplation (which is actually a form of prayer): through simply being still and knowing that the Lord is God. We do it also through study of the scriptures; through private reading of the Bible, we seek to determine, in all humility and awe, what is God's word to us. All these are ways to insure that our roots run deep.

In this hectic, harried world, the temptation is very much to do otherwise. The temptation is to fill our hours with frantic activity: to squeeze in ever more and more, to *do* more and more. Some of us, in our work lives, are caught up in a corporate culture that encourages workaholic overload — and that's tough on the spiritual life.

For centuries — nay, even millennia — our faith has taught us the importance of sabbath, of maintaining a balance between work, leisure, and spiritual devotion.

Just remember: a tree with a shallow root system is vulnerable to the first storm that comes along. It is only the tree whose roots run deep that can hold on, that can bend low with the wind, without being uprooted.

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Finally, let me observe — along with Jeremiah — that a tree planted by water “does not cease to bear fruit.” There’s something that happens, in a life

planted deep in the soil of God's love, that's surprising and unexplainable — yet utterly predictable. Deep within such a life there stirs a force, silent and mysterious and powerful. It's the force of life itself. You look at what had seemed a barren branch, and you see, amazingly, buds begin to emerge. Those buds transform themselves, in short order, into flowers, and the flowers into fruit. Eventually, the tree is so heavy-laden that its branches reach down, as though to bestow their burden on the first passerby.

“The fruit of the Spirit,” says Paul in Galatians 5:22, is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Such are the gifts that begin to emerge, from a life turned Godward. It's not so much that you or I go out and practice these things, training like Olympians to shave a few nanoseconds off our time. No, these wondrous gifts simply emerge, gracefully: the product of the wondrous alchemy of sun and soil and water.

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To the uninitiated, worship may seem to be a strange new world, at first; yet over the long term, it's very much like planting ourselves by streams of water. It's not that any one worship service makes the difference, for most of us. No, it's more of a slow, cumulative process: for worship is a habit, cultivated over many,

many years. It's the very habitual nature of worship that gives our faith staying power — that enables us, as Christians, to weather life's trials and tribulations.

The very function of roots is to soak up and retain water: cool, life-giving, refreshing water. A glass of ice water on a hot and sultry day brings comfort. The roaring beauty of a waterfall is a picture of strength and power. The sheer, sensual pleasure of a hot shower first thing in the morning is a reminder of cleansing and new life. The pristine beauty of a fresh snowfall is an image of purity — a thick, soft blanket that protects life, even in the coldest of winters.

Water is a thing of power as it freezes and expands; as it thunders over the spillway of a hydroelectric dam. Water can wear down the strongest of rocks, and it can scoop out a canyon. Water has power to mold and to smooth — as a potter knows, moistening a cracked lump of clay, working it on the wheel, transforming the ordinary into a thing of wonder.

Through the capillaries of its root system, a tree takes water into its very self, transporting it all the way up the mighty trunk to the leaves. If its roots weren't sunk deep into the ground, a tree could never survive on the fickle sprinkling of rain-showers. It needs to tap into the great underground springs that flow beneath the desert sands. It needs to be “planted by water.”

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One who was spiritually “planted” in just such a way was Horatio Spafford, a Presbyterian lawyer from Chicago. In the year 1873, he placed his wife and four children on a luxury liner, the *Ville du Havre*, bound for France. Spafford’s plan was to follow on another ship in a few weeks, after finishing up some essential business.

Horatio Spafford never saw his children again. The liner on which they were riding collided in mid-ocean with another ship, the British vessel *Loch Earn*, and sank in just twelve minutes. In the tumult and confusion of the wreck, Spafford’s wife, Anna, clung desperately to her four children, but one by one they were swept away by the waves. She herself fell unconscious, and awoke later to find she’d been rescued by a third ship that happened to be nearby — one of the few survivors of the tragedy. There was not a trace of their four children.

Back home, Horatio Spafford — who had heard news of the disaster — was anxiously awaiting word from his family. When the rescue ship reached the coast of Wales, his wife sent him a terse, two-word cablegram: “Saved alone,” was all it said.

With those agonizing words echoing in his mind, her husband plunged into a dark night of anguish such as he’d never known. Yet somehow, in the midst of it all, Spafford found the strength to pray — and out of that prayer came an unearthly

sense of peace, an awareness of God's presence in the midst of mind-numbing grief. Towards morning, he was able to confide in a friend: "I am glad to be able to trust my Lord when it costs me something."

Sometime later, reflecting on the loss in his life, Spafford wrote a hymn. A musician named Philip Bliss composed the tune; he called it "Ville du Havre" — the name of the ship on which Anna and Horatio Spafford's children had died. It's our next hymn this morning:

**When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,  
When sorrows, like sea-billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well with my soul.**

When tragedy intrudes, when life comes crashing in, it is those lives that are "planted by streams of water" that survive, and even flourish. May you remember, through all the days of your life, that if you've been baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, you too are planted by streams of water: the waters of baptism, by which you are made a member of the living, loving — and thriving — body of Christ!