

“The Tree House of God”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
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4th Sun./Pentecost
Ezekiel 17:22-24
Mark 4:26-34

[God said,]

*Someday, I, the LORD, will cut a tender twig from the top of a cedar tree,
then plant it on the peak of Israel's tallest mountain,
where it will grow strong branches and produce large fruit.
All kinds of birds will find shelter under the tree,
and they will rest in the shade of its branches.*

Ezekiel 17:22-23

Let us pray... O God,
Let our walk with you on this journey of life,
be like a walk in a deep forest that has no end;
And the farther we go in, may we have no fear of being lost,
but find only joy as we make new discoveries along the way.

Amen

For most of us living in Florida, it seems almost inevitable
to make a visit to Disney World – and Epcot, too.
When you think of it, what Walt Disney accomplished, is really remarkable –
quite literally a kingdom built on a mouse!
It has been a while since I have been there,
and when I do, there is one place that is my favorite attraction.
Now, “Space Mountain”, “It’s a Small World”, “Pirates of The Caribbean”
are all must-sees for many people, but my special place there
is the “Swiss Family Robinson Tree House”.

<https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/attractions/magic-kingdom/swiss-family-treehouse/>

It’s not a ride, you just get to walk through it –
or rather climb up and down steps, to get through it.
But in the time it takes to do that,
you find yourself in a human habitat that is literally designed
to synchronize with nature.
Furniture and fixtures, tools and accessories of the 19th Century world,
along with re-purposed parts of a shipwreck
are woven into a tree with ropes and platforms –
that have you believing people could really live in a tree.

There is something primordial about treehouses –
and popular enough to be built as homes that people actually live in.
There is a cable TV show that follows a construction team
in their process of contracting with someone to design and build
their dream home as a treehouse,

<https://www.nelsontreehouse.com/show/>

If you are not ready for such an investment, there are treehouses for rent
in Montana, Missouri, the Carolinas, and Disney World, too...

Willard, p.2

The attraction to treehouses may go back to prehistoric times
when humankind was living on the grasslands of Africa
and trees were an effective escape from predators.
Perhaps that was the time of Eden, and the place of innocence and safety,
out of which humankind was driven by newly acquired knowledge
onto a journey into the wider world, a journey that's still going on...

While I was on Sabbatical,
I went back to Lancaster Theological Seminary where I stayed
just a couple days in their guest accommodations.
I loved Santee Chapel with its carved wood altar pieces and pews,
Reformation-themed stained glass windows, and pewter chandeliers.
The students were gone, but I offered to do a Biblical storytelling performance
the next morning for the staff.
I also invited dear friends, Fr. Alexander Veronis who had been the senior priest
of Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church, & and his wife, Presv. Pearl Veronis.

I often went to their church for services – at first, because of a girlfriend,
and I especially loved Fr. Veronis' chanting of the Divine Liturgy.
Whenever I use chant in telling a Bible story,
I am doing it in the style of how Fr. Veronis sang...
Hagios o Theos. Hagios Iskurius. Hagios Athanatos. Eleison Ymas.
Holy is God. Holy and Mighty. Holy and Immortal. Have mercy on us.
That prayer is called the "Thrice Holy", the "Trisagion".
Kyrie Eleison is another prayer – literally, *Lord, Have mercy,*
and also called The Jesus Prayer –
Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.

I also learned to love icons – and some of the drawings I did of Jesus
around that time were influenced by what I learned from this tradition –
like how Jesus had a ponytail.
I attended the Veronises' son George's wedding
and seeing him lead the dance at his reception,
this became part of my inspiration for a drawing I did of "Jesus @ 2000".
We had a good laugh about that when I saw them,
and I was so proud to perform for them,
stories about the beginnings of Jesus' ministry –
stories I have been telling for 30 years!
Stories they had helped inspire in me...

And they had a gift for me – an icon of Jesus, a very unusual image,
one that depicts Jesus emerging from a tree,
with the disciples as branches – a reference to the Gospel of John 15:5...
I am the vine. You are the branches...

Willard, p.3

This image suggests a connection with today's parable and the vision of the mustard seed that grows up to become the largest tree in a garden where birds of the sky find shelter.

That vision of a tree represents a place of community, safety, and inclusivity – reminiscent of what Jesus also said in John 14

about his *house of many mansions...*
and in John 10, about how he had *other sheep not of this fold* to bring to him.

The metaphor of a tree recalls the trees of Eden and their significance for knowledge and eternal life – as well as a reason for exclusion.

That primordial significance of trees to human biology and ancestry still holds true with the Genesis story as prehistoric humanity had to leave the trees of the garden that Earth had been, to go out into the world as an adventurer, discoverer, pilgrim, immigrant, and refugee...

The garden tree of Jesus' parable, the house of many mansions, and other flocks yet to be gathered, speak of the universality of God's love for all people through Jesus of Nazareth.

Once, my youth minister, Pastor Loretta Witmer-Roberts met Fr. Alexander Veronis and they were talking.

Now, Orthodox Christianity has a Sunday liturgy that is even older than the Roman Catholic Mass.

The last time the Orthodox changed anything was back in the 4th Century CE when St. John Chrysostom trimmed it down from 8 hours to 4 hours.

So, with all this tradition behind him,

Fr. Veronis asked Pastor Lori how old her church was,
how old was the United Church of Christ?

Then, without batting an eye and with a smirky smile, Lori said,
"2,000 years!"

So, there you have it, church.

The UCC can hold its own with any Christian church tradition,
because our roots go back to the beginning.

We can hold our own with other faith traditions – and against false ones,
because those roots go even deeper through Judaism
to the Genesis of Creation.

We are part of that tree whose roots to God through Christ go back to the beginning,
and whose branches still reach out to all of humankind
just as it is to be expected of the Beloved Community of God's Kingdom...

Amen

Our lesson today from Ezekiel 17:22-24

*uses the imagery of a tree to give the people of Israel a vision
of their own potential prosperity and consequences,
but also diversity and peace...*

[God said,]

²² Someday, I, the LORD, will cut a tender twig
from the top of a cedar tree,
then plant it on the peak of Israel's tallest mountain,
where it will grow strong branches and produce large fruit.
²³ All kinds of birds will find shelter under the tree,
and they will rest in the shade of its branches.
²⁴ Every tree in the forest will know that I, the LORD,
can bring down tall trees and help short ones grow.
I dry up green trees and make dry ones green.
I, the LORD, have spoken, and I will keep my word.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Mark 4:26-34

²⁶ And [Jesus] said,
"The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground,
²⁷ and should sleep and rise night and day,
and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how.
²⁸ The earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear,
then the full grain in the ear.
²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle,
because the harvest has come."
³⁰ And he said,
"With what can we compare the kingdom of God,
or what parable shall we use for it?
³¹ It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground,
is the smallest of all the seeds on earth;
³² yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs,
and puts forth large branches,
so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."
³³ With many such parables he spoke the word to them,
as they were able to hear it;
³⁴ he did not speak to them without a parable,
but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.