

Rooted in God

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Each January I go to a continuing education program that is hosted in the desert resort community of Carefree Arizona, about a half-an-hour North of Phoenix.

It is a conference full of pastors of my generation, and like most conferences it might as well be in Albany, or Seattle, or Boston for all we would know, because we spend pretty much all our time in hotel conference rooms and dining rooms that look more or less like the hotel conference rooms and dining rooms you would expect to see anywhere else.

This year however, our instructor took pity, and gave our class one free afternoon. While I was tempted to take a nap, or catch up on work, I was coaxed by a group of friends into heading out for a hike in the desert.

We went to a trailhead called Spur Cross Reservation. It is small southern outcropping of the Coconino National Forest, which in its entirety is about the size of Connecticut.

Most of the hike was about what you would expect in the desert.

Dusty, tan, dirt, cracked and dry. Every plant armored with prickles and thorns.

A few stately cactus, reaching up out of the dead dirt.

But at one point we went around a bend, and over a crest, and the landscape before us changed in an instant.

There was a creek, flowing through a desert valley. We couldn't see the water, but what we did see was this green gash through the rocks and dirt.

Trees. Planted by the water.

This is the image that the Prophet Jeremiah is evoking. One that would have been easily understood by his desert dwelling ancient Israelite audience. The difference between the scrubby shrubs that dotted the ordinary landscape, and the instantly recognizable sign of living water, a lush stripe of green, with soaring trees, and grass, and rich brown soil.

That is what it is like to make your life with God, the prophet declared. You will be like a tree planted by the water.

You will flourish, and grow, if you are rooted in God.

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You might imagine God as way up there. More like the sun, pouring out energy and light, and we puny mortals straining heavenward, opening, and craning, and maybe growing a little closer, maybe bending a touch toward the light.

But Jeremiah's image puts God much closer. God is the source from which we draw our very life, not up and away above us, but the very ground in which we our being is planted.

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Once I was at a piece of experimental theatre. At one point during the production, the actors walked out into the audience and organized us into small groups for a discussion. They asked really interesting questions designed to kind of startle people into thinking in ways we hadn't before.

One of them asked: "if you could change one thing about the world in an instant, what would it be?"

Then they just sort of pointed at people putting us each right on the spot.

I listened to several answers, things like “stop wars” “everyone has enough food” “ever child gets a good education.” I think everyone of us was doing the same thing, we were trying to get to the root. In that moment, put on the spot, we were trying to think of the one thing that lay behind all the others. The one thing that if we changed that, everything else would fall into place.

When it came to me I said, “I would have everyone know that they are loved.” Because, the best I can figure, I think that if every person believed in their heart of hearts that they were worthy of love and indeed loved, then we would live our lives, and treat each other, in ways that would make so many of the problems we loathe diminish.

I think that a great many of the ills and evils that we inflict on each other are symptoms of our own individual and collective feelings of worthlessness and isolation.

That may not be right. I remember mostly just feeling grateful that I didn't actually have the power to change one thing, what if I picked the wrong one.

But the point is this, if we seek to be a part of healing the world, if we strive to make the deadest deserts bloom with flourishing life, then we need to attend to the source. We do not need to look out, and up, but in, and deep.

The life we grow will be shaped most foundational by where we are rooted. Where our hearts are anchored. What the still point is at the center of life's swirl.

Our children will be formed much more by the love of the home where they are rooted, than by our specific expectations about how they behave or who they become.

And the community and the world in which we live is an expression of where we have put our roots, what sources we draw nourishment from, what we value most.

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Without paying attention, it is easy in life to slip into topiary mode. Pruning and clipping branches into just the right shape. Buying the right kind of clothes, or signing our kids up for the right groups, going to the right college.

How much of your energy do you expend tending to the surfaces of your life?

How much of your energy to spend tending to your roots?

How much time have you spent running around trying to manage 1,000 outcomes, without looking for the source?

How much time have you spent scrolling through a newsfeed, or watching TV, feeling disappointment, annoyance, or outrage at the behavior of prominent and powerful people, at policies that dehumanize and harm.

How much time have you spent tending to the frayed and broken roots in our national life that allow our tree to bear such fruit?

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Branches need attention too. We cannot ignore the real outcomes and consequences of choices and policies.

But we also need to pay attention to the roots. What is the soil in which our society is growing? What are we reaching toward for nourishment? What is the ground that we are drawing from?

It takes longer, and it is much harder, to cultivate good soil, but the results are so much longer lasting, so much more resilient.

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For us as people of this faith, scripture offers us this: we ought to be rooted in God.

Rooted in God.

So faith is not something that decorate the branches of our lives with. It is not one more thing we add to our to do list. It is not just another activity.

This is the ground in which we are meant to root our lives.

Our faith teaches us that all people are created in the image of God.

What would it mean to root your life in that truth? What would it mean to meditate on this fact until it is the first thought you have about every person you see or hear about? How would that change your

life? And if our lives were changed like that, how would it change the world?

Our faith teaches us to pay attention to the last and the least, to offer particular care to the vulnerable, to those cast out, denigrated, or cast aside. How would your life change if you paid as much attention to the poor as you do to the powerful? How would the world change if we evaluated our choices by how they impacted the most vulnerable among us, instead of asking how the powerful and well-connected?

It teaches us that God loves us, and all people, without condition.

What would your life look like if you never doubted that you were loved? What would the world look like if we all knew that we are loved just as we are?

Our faith teaches us that God is still speaking to us. Where is the Spirit tugging at your heart today. What might you try if you were rooted in the courage that God is with you?

Try this. Take some of that time and energy that you spend worried about outcomes, results, and appearances, and give some attention to the roots.

Explore what the source is at the heart of your life, where have you put down your roots. Where are you reaching for nourishment and substance. Is it working?

Then try this, stretch your roots toward God's overflowing waters. Take 10 minutes of silence today to just sit in appreciation of the gift of living. Or set aside the novel you are reading for a few minutes to explore the words of scripture. Or make a commitment to yourself that you will be here next week, and the week after that too. Make it a priority.

None of those things will fix a problem that you have in a moment. But together, all of them will create good rich soil from which you can draw a fuller life.

Make sure you are attending to your roots. And drive those roots toward the stream of mercy and grace.

Root yourself in God.

And drink deep.