

## “Trees Planted by Streams of Living Water”

Psalm 1; Jeremiah 17:7-8

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Today we celebrate with half a dozen of our young adults, as they graduate from high school and head out into “the real world.” (As if high school wasn’t “real”!) Some of you have been with us a couple years; others of you have been around since, like, *forever*. All of you are beloved and treasured, both by God and by this community of faith, and we send you off today with our love, our prayers, and our blessing. We hope you know that you will *always* have a home here, wherever life may lead you, whatever choices or decisions you may make on your journey. If you find yourself someday needing a safe haven to come home to – it’s here for you, ready and waiting to welcome you with open arms.

I want to talk about trees today. You know, those big, green, fluffy things that grow up big and tall and strong. There’s a lot of ‘em here in Mason. When I’m walking home from church, and I turn down my street, I’ve got this beautiful view of tall trees on both sides. I never get tired of that view – when they’re covered with snow in the winter, when the branches are budding in the spring, when the leaves have come out in full abundance (like right now), and then when the leaves turn colors and descend to the earth, and the trees brace themselves for the winter to come. Those trees have endured a *lot*. Many harsh winters; many strong storms. Sometimes they lose some branches. Sometimes they rot and have to be chopped down. But most of the time, they stand, strong and tall and firm, enduring the elements, providing shade for us and a home for birds, squirrels, and other animals, year after year.

And that’s only the part that we can see. Under the surface, below the ground, each tree has a huge root structure, spreading out in all directions, anchoring it to the ground, soaking up water and nutrients from the earth and sending them up and out to all parts of the tree. If it weren’t for the roots, the tree wouldn’t be able to stand, wouldn’t be able to grow, wouldn’t be able to put out new leaves every spring. The roots are the indispensable, hidden element that makes each tree what it is.

So my question for you today, as you head off into the world, is: *how are your roots?*

Many centuries ago the prophet Jeremiah talked about trees. “They shall be like a tree planted by the water, sending out its roots by the stream.” You can imagine those roots, stretching out from the tree, soaking up the *life* that comes from that flowing water. “It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green.” Why? *Because it’s getting plenty of nourishment from that flowing stream.* “In the year of drought it is not anxious.” Why not? *Because even if there’s no rain, there’s still some water*

*coming down that stream. "And it does not cease to bear fruit." How? Because it's got enough life to produce more life.* That tree has to deal with all kinds of adversity, *yet it remains healthy and strong*, because of the life it's getting from that stream. So it is, says Jeremiah, for those who place their trust in the Lord, who *rely* on the Lord, the way that tree *relies* on the stream. If you want to be a strong and healthy tree in life – able to withstand and endure *anything* that might come your way – *you need to be getting life from that stream.* I think of all the things that can happen to people. The death of a loved one, the loss of a job, a financial crisis, a marriage that crashes and burns, a house fire, a devastating car or motorcycle accident, cancer or any of the other terrible diseases that are out there – I can name person after person who has experienced one, or two, or three, or four, or more of those traumas in life. We've got a lot of people right here in this congregation who have experienced one or more of those. You probably know people in your own life who have experienced one or more of those. Sooner or later, the day will come when *you* are going to be facing one of those things *directly*, yourself, head-on, if you haven't already. We grow up, like trees; we become tall and strong; we think we're invulnerable, that nothing *that bad* could ever happen to us ... and we're wrong. A storm blows in, we're shaken to pieces ... or the sun beats down, we're feeling oppressed under the crushing heat ... winter comes, snow and ice encapsulate our branches, it feels like we're going to break under the weight of it all ... how do we handle it, when things like that happen in life? When the bad news comes, when the you-know-what hits the fan, when we feel like we've just gotten punched in the gut – how do we endure?

I remember the day a few weeks after Colin was born. I was not yet 30 years old. It was a Sunday morning. Katharine woke up and her leg was bloated. I was scheduled to teach a Sunday School class. We called her dad; he came over and took her and baby Colin to urgent care, while I loaded up three-year-old Andrew and took him to the church nursery while I taught my class. This was in the days before cell phones. After my class is over someone comes to fetch me, and I go to the church office, and I'm handed the telephone. It's Katharine's dad. She's got a massive blood clot in her leg; she's being admitted to the hospital; she's going to be there a while. I was leaning against the wall in the office, and I just *sank* to the floor. I've got a three-year-old, and an infant, and a dog. I'm in grad school; I've got classes and responsibilities. A friend of the family asks me what's wrong; I tell her; she tries to reassure me that it's all going to be okay. I remember thinking, *no*. It doesn't feel like it's going to be okay, *at all*.

That particular story has a happy ending. Katharine was in the hospital for nine days; they let Colin stay in the hospital with her; Katharine's mom took care of both of them; I took little Andrew to the hospital twice a day; my teachers were understanding; our wonderful neighbor in the apartment above us took care of Andrew while I walked the dog; we made it work; and Katharine's leg eventually returned more-or-less to normal. Not all stories have such happy endings. I know people who were about the same age, whose story didn't have such a happy ending. A young parent, for example, who gets cancer and dies. *None of us know* when the day's going to come when life is never going to be the same. When the storm comes, two things really matter. The first is obvious: *what can we do to solve the problem?* What kind of medical care do we need, for example? The second is less obvious, but it's equally important: how are *you* going to *hold up*, tall and strong, in the midst of it all – no matter how bad the storm, how oppressive the heat, how weighty the snow and ice?

How are your roots? Are they getting the nutrients they need?

There are all sorts of ways people cope with adversity in life. Sometimes people escape into movies, TV shows, or video games, and that can be fine, in moderation. Sometimes people throw themselves into a hobby, or a sport, or charity work, and that can also be fine, in moderation. But sometimes people make less healthy choices. They turn to food to deal with their problems, and end up, in time, facing a different set of issues. They turn to alcohol, or drugs, or pornography, or sex, sometimes making a complete mess of their lives in the process. What happens – and it happens *a lot* – is that people are dealing with *one* set of issues in life, and in their hurt and pain and fear they develop some bad habits, which ultimately create a whole *'nother* set of issues in life. Sometimes people just spiral down, lower and lower, making one poor choice after another. I know a young guy from Mason who's in jail, right now. Nice guy. Tons of potential. But he needs to start making better choices.

What's the solution? Well, keep your nose clean, for one. Which is sometimes easier said than done, especially when you are surrounded by friends who aren't making very wise choices. I spent my first year in college hanging out with people who were making poor choices, though we all thought we were so incredibly "mature." At the beginning of my second year I realized, "This ain't doing me any favors." I found a new group of friends, and my life *dramatically* improved.

But you need more than just that. You need a *constant source of healthy nutrients* for life. You need a *flowing stream* that will root you and ground you and help you to stay tall and strong, *no matter what* may come in life. You need an endless supply of *living water*. But where can you find *that*?

There's a story in the Gospel of John about a woman who goes to the well in the middle of her village to fetch some water. There's a guy sitting there, by the well. He was a traveler, just passing through, and he was tired, and resting. He strikes up a conversation with her. They start talking about water. They start talking about *living water*. A special kind of water that this guy has to offer. A water which can cause people to never be thirsty again. The conversation moves from the physical to the spiritual. The woman will still need water for her *body*. He's talking about what she needs for her *soul*. To be able to withstand all the trials and tribulations of life. To help her become a strong tree, planted by streams of living water, vibrant and flourishing, *no matter what*. He offers her *living water*.

Friends, I can't tell you exactly what you're going to face in this life. There will be a lot of joy. A lot of things to celebrate. There will also be a lot of hard work. There will be disappointments, setbacks, unpleasant surprises. There will be some days when something happens and nothing is ever the same again. There will be disease. There will be death, of people close to you, and eventually your own. I'm not trying to depress you. I'm trying to be realistic. There's going to be some hardship in life. There's going to be some stuff you're going to have to endure. You're going to need something, *someone*, who can guide you. *Nourish* you. Friends are great ... but they're not enough. Church people are great ... but they're not enough. When the bad news comes, when the you-know-what hits the fan, when you feel like you've just gotten punched in the gut ... what's going to get you through? Where's the *living water*?

His name is Jesus. He loves you *so incredibly much*. He's willing to give absolutely *everything* he has to offer. Which is a *lot*. He can be an utterly unquenchable source of *living water* ... *if* you want it.

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