

A God's Eye View: Of You! Pt. 8
Oaks of Righteousness
Psalm 1, Isaiah 61: 1-3

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

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Last week, we considered two names the LORD I Am promises his people in Isaiah: *Repairer of the Breach* and the *Restorer of Streets to Dwell In*. These are very active titles. You know from a renovating a house, that "repairing the ruins" is an arduous task, full of dirt, bruises, sweat and exhaustion. Today's name describes a service that appears to be much quieter, even passive though no less significant in effect.



Isaiah 61: 3 declares that we will “be called *oaks of righteousness*, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified.” We live in a city full of wonderful live oaks. Trees like this are alive with activity. Their roots sink deep into the soil to search for moisture and anchor the tree against the winds of the world. In the process, these roots may burrow through rock and reshape the earth where the tree is planted. Further, they brace the ground with their grip against erosion, preserving the landscape. Their branches reach for sunlight so their leaves may enact the miracle of photosynthesis. In the process, carbon dioxide becomes oxygen, the air is renewed, and all animal life benefits. Birds and squirrels find a home. The leaves that fall in the new year nourish the soil below. In Baton Rouge, we design houses *around* mature live oaks. The house has to fit the tree. They are that important to us. Such oaks are landmarks for our travels, they help us know where we are. These oaks are markers in our life journeys. Children play under their shade; secrets are shared beneath them; lovers get engaged, and elders remember all the things this tree has witnessed through the years.

Isaiah envisioned the redeemed people as being the result of God's own gardening efforts in the world. The LORD calls us "the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I might be glorified" (60:21). The LORD is both the gardener and the ground in which we grow. He nourishes us with his life so that we become what we were made to be. God is the garden itself: "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17: 28). His soil is filled with righteousness. This means that if our lives are grown in God, there will be an essential rightness, a wholeness, in all our living. We will be living from an organic relationship with God.

Like trees we will take in the life and light he gives us and give out spiritual oxygen, fruit and shade which pleases God and sustains the world. God will grow up through us, causing us to be at peace with ourselves and transforming our relationship with others. The flourishing trees in the LORD's garden thus become a display of God's glory for the world to see. Isaiah continues,

For as the earth brings forth its sprouts,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to sprout up before all the nations (Is. 61: 11).

God works in us to cause us to spring up with righteousness and praise. Growing in God's garden, we glorify him. Being what God makes us, we show forth his praise.

As we have seen, this transformation in us is the work of the promised Redeemer. Through Jesus, God shapes according to the way he sees us: As his Delight, the ones Sought Out, his Repairers. He grows in us an identity which we cannot receive or create on our own. Jesus elaborated on this image of being a planting of the Lord in John 15. His illustration revolved around the concept of *abiding*. To abide means to dwell or remain in a certain place or condition. It is a word for a kind of *active passivity* in which we allow God to be in us what he desires. We simply consent to remain as God has made us, to be conduits for what God does within us. Jesus said:

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing... By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. (John 15: 4-5, 8).

The illustration is of a relationship. There is interchange between the vine and its branches. A kind of mutual indwelling occurs. Jesus is in us and we are in Jesus. Christ flows through us and we produce fruit which glorifies God. Our part is cooperation, a consent of the will which invites and allows God to shape us as he wills. We sink our roots into Christ through prayer and worship, through the stud of Scripture and in fellowship with other believers. We live from him as our source.

Another way to describe abiding is *living reliance*. We require a constant turning towards Jesus as our sustaining vine. We discover that we are called to do nothing on our own. As branches, we draw constantly from Jesus Christ, the vine. In

that way we bring forth fruit that blesses the world. The great missionary and theologian, Lesslie Newbigin has written eloquently of this passage:

This fruit is not an artifact of the disciples; it is the fruit of the vine. It is the life of Jesus himself reproduced in the lives of the disciples in the midst of the life of the world...the fruit is love and obedience.ⁱ

Jesus' own love and obedience becomes ours, as we are connected to the vine. The fruit of our lives is his life expressed through ours.

Our role is agreeing to stay connected. Newbigin continues,

But it is necessary to "abide" in Jesus, and this means a continually renewed action of the will. It is the continually renewed decision that what has been done once for all by the action of Jesus shall be the basis, the starting point, the context of all my thinking and deciding and doing...but 'the loyalty demanded is not primarily a continual being *for*, but a being *from*; not the holding of a position but an allowing oneself to be held'ⁱⁱ

We consent to be in the care of Jesus, to draw our life from him. We agree day by day just where we are to be from Christ, and to be held by him. We invite him to reproduce his life in us. This focus actually makes us more fruitful for God than any busy-ness or great works we attempt for God without being fully grounded in God's Word and will.

Psalm 1 describes those who sink their roots into the story of God's loving activity in the world live with a blessed joy:

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.

He is like a tree planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers (Ps. 1: 1-3).

If the soil of one's life is the way of the world as it is without God, then the harvest is one of hollow laughter, temporarily holding despair at bay. But if one is planted in the garden of God's love, the yield is a prospering fruitfulness in every endeavor. Storms can be weathered; droughts can be endured. Even as we age, we can be spiritually supple and fruitful in our relationships.

We long to be near people who are mighty oaks, people of great faith and tenacious stability. I love to see great trees growing next to rushing streams. Their roots wrap around the granite of the sides of the creek bed. They protect the entire hillside from eroding into the water so that younger trees may flourish above them. Moreover, these great trees endure through the years. Those who are the oaks of the LORD live with a consistency of fidelity in their relationships that has a world-sustaining, world-changing effect through the years.

Enduring friendships bear witness to the astounding power of love given over time. Friends see each other through difficult days and rejoice in blessings. They see us through weddings, job searches, deaths, child rearing, divorces, hurricanes, cancers and the thousand tiny joys and struggles of daily life. Such friends know the good and certainly know the bad. They endure through difficult winters as well as seasons of harvest. The length of years of understanding and acceptance make their friendship mighty oaks in our lives. We shelter in such love.

Not every tree grows to a mighty height. But the ones that do give unique stability to the forests. So, too, not every marriage makes it. That's a sad reality of our life in the world. But marriages that last half a century or more anchor entire communities. We shelter under their branches more than we realize. After fifty years, hundreds of people take it for granted that a couple is together. The very rhythms of their life provide a pace for all those in the neighborhood. They are good people to talk to when life feels chaotic. They have children and grandchildren whose understanding of the world is that love is meant to last. Their offspring have an essential peace and sense of security. Its source is seldom acknowledged, but on reflection, the fidelity of the marriage is foundational. These relationships create optimism amidst a dark world. They bear witness to the slow triumph of love over the louder, sharper acts of chaos and evil.

Further, the oaks of righteousness are the people who hold businesses, churches, and communities together with their quiet faithfulness. Their presence here maintains the praise of God in worship week after week, year after year. They know how consistency in attendance and support provides the "glue" for the rest of us. These oaks enable whole communities to flourish by their integrity, their hard,

productive work for decades and their just dealings with all whom they meet. They show up on time for their appointments and they keep their promises. They ground us all. Such oaks love young people and provide a sense of home for years to children of many families. Their houses are places of peace. A quiet atmosphere of order pervades. They understand life in a larger context. They retain perspective through the years that others in their hurry often lose. Though not flamboyant, these are people who possess life-giving vision which arises from meditating upon the law of the LORD.

Today is Father's Day. We want to particularly celebrate the way that being a father is a calling to be an oak of righteousness. There are mighty oaks in our midst. Dads who are faithful. Who go to work and toil with love in their hearts and loved ones on their minds. They come home and find the strength to pay attention to little ones. They listen and sometimes advise. They guide and correct, though sometime by letting kids make their own mistakes. They provide both discipline and freedom. They run by the bike that has just shed its training wheels, but when it's time they let go so the little one can ride on her own.

Their faithfulness creates the security on which their children rely. Their consistency is like oxygen. Their faith, far from making them unmanly, grounds them in the rock of the true Father and the high king. This gives these fathers a strength they could not have on their own. Consistent, faithful, energetic and vigilant fathers are vital to the renewal of communities. There is stunning power in just going home and being present to your loved ones.

We're so blessed to be part of a church that cultivates oaks, both men and women. In a church that is two centuries old, we know that we grow under the canopy of faithful, fruitful oaks of righteousness that have spread their branches over the decades to come. We thrive in a history of worship and fidelity. We draw upon the faith of those who consistently drew upon the life of Christ, as trees by a stream draw on the life-giving waters. We understand that every choice we make to consent to live from Christ has profound effects. Our lives are not just for us. The world desperately needs oaks of righteousness. Day by day, quietly, but consistently, every decision to live *from* Christ Jesus is a decision to live *for* the blessing of the world.

ⁱ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come: An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982, p. 197.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. p. 198.