

# “Trees: Signals of Hope, Love and Resurrection”

*Deuteronomy 20:19; Psalm 1, 96:12, 148:7 & 9; Isaiah 11:1, 44:23, 55:12; Ezekiel 17:24; Job 14:7-9; & 1 John 4:16*

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**Prayer for Understanding** Loving God, nourish us with your word like you nourish the earth. Prepare our hearts and minds like you send the rain to water the earth making it fertile. May your word move us to do your will like the seeds you provide that become fruitful. Amen

Martin Luther was asked what he would do if he knew the world was ending. He answered, “I would plant a tree.”

I could talk for days about the glorious experiences of God I have had through trees throughout my life. Last week, when I saw that the renowned Old Testament scholar Walt Brueggemann wrote an article, *Trees: Signals of Hope and Defiance*, I immediately read the article. I am excited to share several of his insights woven together with my own.

Walter began by recommending everyone read *Wangari Maathai: The Woman Who Planted Millions of Trees*. It is a true story that we need to share with each other, with our children, and grandchildren.

Wangari’s story inspired Walt to think about trees and the role they play in the Bible for a viable creation. That crucial role played by trees has been played since the appearance of trees on the third day of creation.

In the Torah, fruit trees are given explicit protection, because their presence and flourishing are indispensable for the wellbeing of creaturely life. Deuteronomy states: **Deuteronomy 20:19 “You must not destroy trees by wielding an axe against them. Although you may take food from them, you must not cut them down.”** The Torah regulation eagerly vetoes a trade-off of trees for money!

Trees are reckoned as lively creatures and not simply inanimate objects waiting to be exploited. As lively creatures, trees are gladly included in the joyous praise of Israel to the Creator. The psalmist sings: **Psalm 96:12 “All the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord.” Psalm 148:7 & 9 “Praise the Lord fruit trees and cedars!”** The prophet Isaiah proclaims: **Isaiah 44:23 “Sing, O heavens, for the Lord has done it; shout, O depths of the earth; break forth into singing, O mountains, O forest, and every tree in it!”** **Isaiah 55:12 “The mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.”** These lyrical lines trace out the “Social Life of Trees” as creatures in full engagement with God. The prophet Ezekiel proclaims: **Ezekiel 17:24 “All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the Lord have spoken; I will accomplish it.”**

The story of Job is one of intense loss, grief, and suffering. Job concludes with a message of hope, redemption and resurrection illustrated by trees rising again. **Job 14:7-9 “For there is hope for a tree, if a tree is cut down, that tree will sprout again and a tree’s shoots will not cease. Though a tree’s root grows old in the earth and a tree’s stump dies in the ground, yet at the scent of water a tree will bud and put forth branches like a young plant.”** Trees are restorers of life. Trees provide hospitality for an array of plants and animals. Trees absorb waste that is destroying the earth. Trees transform waste into energy, life, and vitality. Trees reveal the redemptive love of God. Trees are signs of hope. Trees are defiant of death. Humans may deforest a portion of the earth leaving barren death. And yet that area can be resurrected back to life by planting trees.

The prophet Isaiah explains that things on earth are so bleak, it is like a tree cut down to a rotting stump. And yet, there is hope for the kingdom of God will be established like a shoot, a sapling, a tree, growing from that stump. Isaiah states: **Isaiah 11:1 “Out of the stump of David’s family will grow a shoot—yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root.”** In the New Testament, that new sapling is interpreted to be Jesus.

The first psalm proclaims that our quest in life is to become like a tree rooted in the soil of love, nourished by the living waters of grace, so we can be loving and gracious producing fruit for all. Our quest is to

delight in the law of the Lord, which Jesus explained, can be summed up in one word, “love”. We are to continually ponder how we can grow in love. Continually, strive to be more loving and accepting of more love. When we fail to love we are scattered, anxious, fearful, like chaff. Lack of love can lead to worthless hate. Hate will be condemned. Hate will be destroyed. The one who grows in love is more and more transplanted into the soil of love and the grace of living water allowing them to expand in love for eternity. A more accurate translation of the Hebrew word to “planted” is “continually transplanted”. The message is the more you love, the more you are able to love, in an ever-growing spiral of love, expanding the love of the cosmos. The psalmist sings: **Psalm 1 “Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join in with mockers. But they delight in the law of the Lord, meditating on it day and night. They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season. Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do. But not the wicked! They are like worthless chaff, scattered by the wind. They will be condemned at the time of judgment. Sinners will have no place among the godly. For the Lord watches over the path of the godly, but the path of the wicked leads to destruction.”**

John declared: **1 John 4:16 “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”** A person who is tenacious in love is a partner with God in redeeming the world and establishing the Kingdom of God on earth. Which brings us full circle to Wangari Maathai. In the face of deforestation, she lovingly planted trees. In the face of oppression, she lovingly set people free. In the face of a dictator, she lovingly established democracy. In a region where chaos reigns, she lovingly brought stability. In a time of despair, she lovingly instilled hope. When sadness burdened people she lovingly fostered joy. In the midst of suffering, she lovingly comforted with peace. She lovingly gave jobs to the unemployed. She lovingly educated the uneducated. She lovingly turned people from pillaging the environment to caring for the environment. Her brave hope was an act of defiance, a refusal to accept political-social arrangements that seemed to be firmly established. She was a relentless, brave witness to the conviction that our public political processes can indeed serve the common good. She shows how a life propelled toward the common good can achieve stunning accomplishments for the wellbeing of all people. Wangari intuitively knew that planting a tree expands the love of the cosmos. Wangari is a living example of the proclamation of the Apostle Paul: with love all things are possible.

You have the same transformative energy that you set free whenever you love. You have the same transformative energy that you set free whenever you love. Amen