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Athelstone Uniting Church #118

6 September 2020

Season of Creation: Forest Sunday

Texts: *Psalm 139:13–16, Genesis 2:4b–22, Acts 17:22–28, John 3:1–16 NIV*

Video clip

From *Our Planet: Forests* – a Netflix documentary narrated by David Attenborough. Play from 1:30 to 2:45 only. <https://youtu.be/JkaxUblCGz0>

Explain video

This brief clip is the introduction to the documentary about Forests - from the Netflix *Our Planet* series (Episode 8). Narrated by David Attenborough, the whole episode is worth watching, with footage of the inhabitants of the world's seasonal forests. The scenes cover the splendour and the threatened nature of the forests that keep planet Earth healthy.

Forest - theme

Today is Forest Sunday – part of the Season of Creation -

A time to give thanks for creation and celebrate with creation. We recognise that we are not only called to serve and sustain life, but recognise how creation serves and sustains life. as Christians we celebrate Jesus Christ as our personal savior as well as the cosmic power at work renewing and healing a suffering creation.

So, today, we focus specifically on forests... and if you're thinking this is unusual for a sermon, just consider..

... The bible starts and finishes with trees, from the Garden of Eden to the New Jerusalem planted with trees that bear fruit every month. At the centre of our

Christian faith, Jesus died on a wooden cross, the carpenter crucified on a broken tree, which has become for us the tree of life.

and so today we celebrate God's creation of the trees on which we and all life depend: for soil, water, food and even the air we breathe.

Today we also consider the threats caused to trees and forests by human greed and carelessness.

We are called to respond, by worshipping the God who creates and sustains the trees of the forest, by recognising our dependence on trees, and by committing ourselves to enable trees to flourish and, in the words of Psalm 96, to "Let all the trees of the forest sing for joy"

forest – me personally and local area

I grew up in Aldgate where right across the road a pine forest had been cleared for housing.

My childhood memories of life in Aldgate includes the sound of chain saws every weekend as people cleared their blocks of land.

Yet I remember on that large empty block across the road, there would always be pine seedlings popping up throughout that cleared space.

When I was born, my Dad planted a pine tree in our front yard. Later, he did the same for my brother.

In between them was a more mature tree which I used to love climbing in as a child. I broke my right wrist falling out of that tree!

Years later when we moved down to Banksia Park, we were devastated when all those trees were chopped down by the new owners.

For many years Paul and I lived in a home, also in Banksia Park, with a huge maple in the front yard. It marked the seasons for us with new buds in spring time, full leafy shade in summer, stunning autumn colours and wonderful fallen leaves to rake up in Autumn and then the beauty of the outline of those bare branches in winter. The birds loved that tree, especially the drying seed pods in winter and the possums would dive from the tree on to our house every night!



Now we have the pleasure of living in Athelstone. Looking out our back window at the manse I can see a number of trees including a large gum, which lately has been home to a noisy koala.

We are so blessed to live in this location so close to Morialta National Park.



I have great memories of visiting places where there are lots of trees: including the south east of this state, Bundaleer forest, tropical rainforests in Queensland, Tasmania, Slovenia,

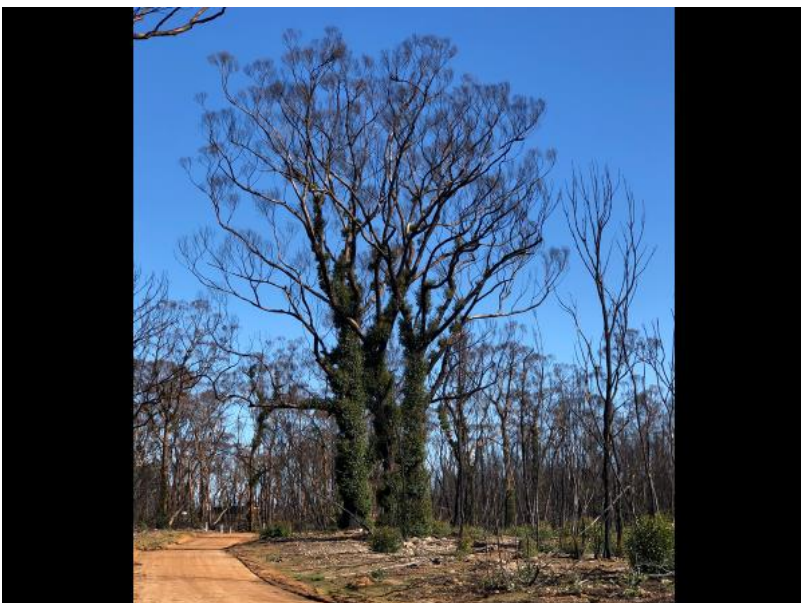


And the Dandenongs where this photo was taken (not my photo – but that of Paul Macallan through unsplash)

Each place has its own character, beauty, sights, sounds, smells

Perhaps you can picture a forest where you have been... can you remember the sights, the sounds, the smells?

Recently we had the confronting experience of seeing the burned out forests and bushland on Kangaroo Island. As well as the encouraging signs of new growth



I stopped to take this photo of three trees in the burnt forest with new growth all over their trunks.

Similarly, last night, South Australian photographer Nikki Redman, shared her photo from Kangaroo Island on the ABC facebook page.



she said:

"I call this the tree of life, I've watched the amazing regeneration of this beautiful tree since the Kangaroo Island bushfires

I always stop to take in the beauty of it's amazing rebirth. This is a Stringy Bark Messmate, *Eucalyptus obliqua*."

The tree of life ...

We have learned through local Kurna elder Ivan Copley and Adnyamathanha woman Rev Aunty Denise Champion about the indigenous relationship with trees. Families or clan groups have their own special tree. Soon after birth, the placenta would be buried near the base of the tree, providing nourishment to the tree. While the tree would provide safe shelter. A close connection.

I have always felt a deep connection to trees and great reverence for them too.

There is so much to say about the trees and forests!

We know that they are crucial to our life here on earth –

They store carbon, cleaning the air, helping us to breathe

They are home to countless species

They take in energy from sunlight and transforming it to leaves where that energy is usable by insects, mammals and birds;

they feed oxygen and minerals into the ocean;

they create rain;

they gather and neutralize harmful pollutants

they create homes and building materials;

they offer shade;

they provide medicine and produce a wide variety of fruits and nuts

They sustain all manner of wildlife.

They are the planet's heat shield, slowing the evaporation of water and cooling the earth.

and there are so many things we are only just discovering about the way they communicate with each other, the way they look out for each other, the healing properties of the gases they produce, and the way they are connected in mysterious ways beneath the earth's surface

the texts

I suggested trying to hear this week's texts from the perspective of a tree.. perhaps you heard them call us to reconnect with our special relationship with forests?

genesis

Genesis tells of the beginnings, as the writers imagined them, of life on Earth. They remind us that Eden was, in a sense, our first forest home.

We are all connected –

All living things are our kin, created as humans (Hebrew word adam) from the ground (hebrew word adama).

We hear how humankind was given the role of caring for the earth and all creation – to be stewards, caretakers (not there to exploit and dominate)

Every piece of the creation is connected to every piece - like a gigantic living organism – we are part of a web of life

nothing exists in isolation

A change in one piece affects other pieces

If we damage one part of creation we damage the whole creation. Every species, plant or animal, insect or microbe, has a role in the ecology of the creation.

humans have a special responsibility to care for the whole of creation – not to be predators and plunderers.

Acts

Through the Acts reading we are reminded to think of the mysterious, unknown voice of God – perhaps dwelling in amongst the Athenians, perhaps dwelling in the forest.

After having seen the altar 'to an unknown God' in Athens, Paul tells the Judicial leaders that, in his experience, God can be known. God created everything and, in God, all creation "lives and moves and has its being."

We were born to search for God – we were all created with the same breath and inner impulse to search for God's presence

we can find God by looking at creation – and see ourselves as part of creation.

When read together on Forest Sunday, these texts speak through the trees, saying, "find God through the earth." Each text, in its own way, asks that we find God's majesty, mystery, and voice, in the places of mystery on Earth, especially in the forests where trees live.

there is something magnificent and mysterious about forests and about great trees. But Trees are in trouble. Huge swathes of ancient forests are gone. Why? Deforestation, development, climate change.

in the past we didn't know how important they are, so we cleared the land, without hesitation

now we are learning how to protect and revegetate forests

how to create nature corridors

and how to grow plantation timbers in sustainable ways

God put the human in the garden to tend it and to keep it. That is part of our calling. We are partners with God in caring for this planet we call home.

So make an appointment with a gum tree. Marvel at a river red. Say 'thank you' to a lemon-scented. Plant a sapling. Speak up when an ancient tree is threatened by development. Do something for the trees who do so much for you.

John

The gospel reminds us how God so loved the world that he sent his Son. It for reconciliation of the whole world, not just human kind..

In Colossians it says that in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross (Colossians 1: 19-20).

All things on earth or in heaven. Not only humans, distracted by hunger and greed, but suffering forests, groaning woodlands, ancient trees--all of them healed, restored, renewed--- a new heaven and a new earth.¹

So, why as Christians would we be interested in Creation and in particular, Forests?

Because it is part of our calling right back to the original creation story – to tend to this earth and to join in Christ’s mission to reconcile all of creation and make all things new

Because it is a shared concern we have with the community around us – the common good - a common interest in preserving and restoring the forests and the natural environment

Because as humans we depend on the survival of the forests

Because as part of creation we worship God with the trees as we marvel with arms outstretched at the wonder of God’s goodness and amazing creativity

Like the trees, let us send our roots down deep, connected to the love of Christ, the sustainer of all living things.

Amen

¹ “Paarlberg Forest Sunday Sermon” John D. Paarlberg The First Church in Albany, September 14, 2014