
Clapping Trees and Seasons of Soil

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Lauren Holder
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 10, Year A

Have you ever seen a tree clap its hands?

I ask because of our passage from Isaiah today... have you ever seen a tree clap its hands?

The prophet Isaiah proclaims this good news from God:

“For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.”

I love this passage because I used to watch the trees clap their hands every morning. I was living in Cotonou, the coastal city and business capital of Benin, West Africa. After living with a family for several months, I was finally renting my own place. A pink stucco house with a water well and a yard.

Near the entrance of my yard was a canopy of bougainvillea, offering protection and shade with its bright pink blooms wicked thorns. By the shed was a banana tree, with real bunches of bananas that would ripen all at once, so you had to share them with neighbors before they went bad. And along one side of the house were several palm trees.

The kitchen was attached to the house but had a separate entrance... so I had to exit my living room door, walk three steps outside, and open my kitchen door if I wanted to grab something from the fridge when the power was working. It wasn't the most convenient setup, but it did keep the inevitable pests out of the living quarters.

Every morning, I would sit outdoors on that 4-foot stretch of tile between the living room and kitchen. I would breathe in the morning air, drink my tea, write in my journal, and listen for God. And every morning, the palm trees would clap their hands. There is no better description for the movement and the sound... the wind would move through the leaves like oversized hands that would slap together and clap for joy.

So much about that season of life is a blur. Speaking French, teaching English, arguing over the price of eggs at the market, or riding the back of a motor-bike taxi with no helmet.

I think back on those days and it feels like someone else living a different life in a different world. Maybe you have seasons of life that feel that distant as well.

But then I think of the trees clapping their hands in the morning, and it's as if I'm transported back in time. I remember with clarity the intimacy I felt with God all those mornings sitting outside the kitchen. I remember listening to and watching the trees clap their hands and thinking, 'This is significant. I am resting in the palm of God's hand, and the trees know it. I will carry this with me forever.' And I have. Maybe you too have moments or seasons that remain palpable and real no matter how much time has passed.

I say all this because our Gospel text talks about a sower and soil and seeds. And the sower, soil and seeds know something about seasons, too. I'm especially interested in the seasons of soil.

Because when we hear this Gospel, it might be tempting to hear about the different types of soil and assume they represent different types of people.

It might be tempting to hear about the dirt on the path and think: Oh, I know that type. I know *those people* who just refuse to believe in God—no matter what!

And it might be tempting to hear about the rocky soil and immediately think of *those people* in your life who are so wishy-washy. They seem genuinely interested in God for a few weeks and then they're back to their "old ways."

And it might be tempting to hear about the soil among the thorns and conjure up images of *those people* who are essentially possessed by their possessions.

And it might be especially tempting to hear with relief about the good soil, look around this room, and think: Ah, yes. Here we are. The people who have taken God's Word to heart. It feels so good to be good soil alongside all these other good people.

Only, I don't think that's what this parable is about. I don't think the different types of soil are meant to classify different types of people.

I think the different types of soil are present within each of us. Sometimes we're like the dirt path, sometimes we're like the rocky soil, sometimes we're caught in the thorns, and occasionally, yes, we are good and fertile soil. Soil has seasons. And we do too.

For soil to be good, it has to be dug up and turned over. For soil to be good, it has to lie fallow for a time. For soil to be good, it has to absorb the nutrients only stinky decay or manure can provide. The soil isn't born good or bad. It is what it is based on its season of life and the care it receives.

Some seasons are long and can feel like a lifetime ago. Others are especially short like different moods in the course of a day. No matter how short or long the season, our own health determines how well we can receive the Word of God and bear the fruits of God's love. *The soil isn't who we are, but how we are.*

So how are you? How are you today? Are you path-y, rocky, thorny, or healthy? Don't be scared of the question or your answer to it—it's not a life sentence. It's not a judgment. It's a season.

No matter what season you are in, you are a child of God, lovingly created in the loving image of God. And when you are the fullest expression of yourself, all of creation rejoices! The trees clap their hands! And when you're the tired, scared, sad, angry, or selfish version of yourself, you are *still* a child of God deserving of the care that can bring you wholeness again.

Perhaps you are in a season of being turned upside down. Perhaps you're in a season of lying fallow. Or maybe you are knee deep in the stinky stuff. No matter what kind of soil you are or what kind of season you are in, remember that God scatters seed everywhere... not just on the good soil, but everywhere.

No matter how you are today, know that you are loved. And hear God's promise to you:

"You shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands." Amen.