

## Flourishing into the Future

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### Psalm 1

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In his book, *A Walk in the Woods*, author Bill Bryson and his old college friend made an attempt, a failed attempt by the way, to try and hike the Appalachian Trail, the 2100-mile trail that stretches from Springer Mountain, Georgia, in the south to the mountains of Maine. Bryson explains at least one reason, why he was compelled to go: ‘the Appalachians are the home of the world’s great hardwood forests—the expansive relic of the richest, most diversified sweep of woodland ever to grace the temperate world,’ and that was not the only reason, but one compelling enough to Bryson to try and explore this forest through the mountains from Georgia to Maine. A footpath through the woods, surrounded by primeval forest, changes us.

In his poem ‘Birches,’ Robert Frost offers a vivid picture of a birch tree with its branches hanging low to the ground probably by a big snow or ice storm, but perhaps, as he imagines, reflecting on his own childhood, ‘I should prefer to have some boy bend them as he went out and in to fetch the cows—some boy too far from town to learn baseball, whose only play was what he found himself ‘(no phones or technology then, so apparently playing baseball was the big problem and distraction from play). Frost continues: ‘one by one he subdued his father’s trees by riding them down over and over again until he took the stiffness out of them and not one but hung limp, no one was left to conquer.’ Frost continues to paint a vivid picture of a boy swinging through the birch tree branches and in his old age looks back, ‘So was I once myself a swinger of birches. And so, I dream of going back to be. It’s when I’m weary of considerations, and life is too much like a pathless wood where your face burns and tickles with cobwebs broken across it, and one eye is weeping from a twig’s having lashed across it open.’ And at the end of the poem, Frost imagines ascending to heaven should be like ‘climbing a birch tree *Toward* heaven, till the tree could bear no more, but dipped its top and set me down again. That would be good both going and coming back.’<sup>1</sup> The birch tree becomes the companion that bends and sways with our play, lifts us up beyond ourselves when we are weary of life’s considerations, and sets us down in a place just right once again. In the words of the old Shaker hymn ‘Simple Gifts,’ when we find ourselves in the place just right, twill be in the valley of delight...to bow and to bend we will not be ashamed, to turn, turn will be our delight, till by turning, turning we come round right.’ There is something about swinging

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Frost, ‘Birches,’ in *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (1969).

in those birch trees of his childhood, that like the work of the Holy Spirit, turned Frost, and in so turning, set him down and helped him come round right.

This school year I have had the gift of getting to read and re-engage once again with the book *To Kill a Mockingbird* through the eyes of one of my own. For the small number of you who may not be *To Kill a Mockingbird* nerds like me, you may not already know how the novel came to be in the first place. Around Christmas of 1956, fledgling and aspiring author Nelle Harper Lee was working as an airline reservationist to make ends meet and could not head home to Alabama during the Christmas holidays as it was a busy season for her travel work and so she was invited to spend Christmas in the home of some friends she had made named Michael and Joy Brown. The Browns had enjoyed a recent windfall from a successful musical special they helped produce and so on Christmas morning they placed an envelope for Nelle Harper Lee under the Christmas tree. Inside the note read: 'You have one year off from your job to write whatever you please. Merry Christmas.' Lee responded with all the objections we would anticipate: 'too much money; crazy idea; too generous.' And one by one each objection was rejected. In his account of this Christmas miracle, writer Joseph Crespino reminds us that this lavish gift 'wasn't [just] an act of generosity, it was an act of love, and emboldened by this confidence and love that others saw in her, 'Lee was determined to honor the faith that her friends had shown in her.'<sup>2</sup>

Well thanks to the Browns' investment, we now have *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and I remember reading through some of the chapters this time around and experiencing a feeling I had not experienced in previous encounters with the book; the feeling of jealousy alongside admiration. I was hearing the words and the vivid descriptions of small-town life and quirky neighbors described in loving terms and the effortless flow of the narrative, and I recall shaking my head and saying to myself, 'I wish I could write like that.' Sometimes all we can do is stand in awe and admiration and a little bit of jealousy that these God-given gifts have been put to use so well, and once we get over our envy, thank God for the generosity, stewardship, investment, and love of people who allowed this gift to grow and take flight. One of the minor characters in the book is of course a tree, a tree that resides in the ominous and forbidden Radley yard, and a tree that for a season through a hollow knot-hole in its center bears gifts that seem to be meant for the young children so fascinated with the mystery of the Radley house and persona. At various times, the Finch children find chewing gum and carvings of a little girl and little boy and a pocket watch and other little gifts that captivate them and connect them to the mysterious life beyond the tree.

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Crespino, *Atticus Finch: Harper Lee, Her Father, and the Making of American Icon*, New York: Basic Books, 2018.

So, what on earth does all this prelude have to do with the first psalm and with the way of the Lord that calls upon the people of God to follow the way of the Lord and to become like trees planted by streams of water? I am not sure where the quote originates, but it says something like the 'great thing about books is that they allow us to travel to places without ever having to go somewhere or even move our feet,' and in a similar way, at our best, churches and Christian community are like that. Like the Appalachian trail leading us into a forest and trail knowing that when we get through the 2100 miles on the other side, we will not be the same person who set out. Life together in Christian community is like those birch trees that allow us to thrive and flourish to become 'children at play in the fields of the Lord,' through the ties that bind and the branches that support us as we are carried forth and set down again, often in a better place than where we started, especially, in Frost's words, when we are 'weary of considerations and life [has become] too much like a pathless wood.'<sup>3</sup> And I like to think that church resembles the love and generosity of Harper Lee's friends Michael and Joy Brown, who believed in her, invested in her, saw something in her way beyond what was possible in the moment or maybe what she saw in herself. In the moment, even by the recipient, such grace and generosity and love can scarcely be believed. And weirdly looking back and through the providence of God, in the case of Lee's novel as a work of art and gift to the world, the initial generous gift may actually seem small or at least way beyond worth the initial investment.

And perhaps the church is also like that tree in the novel, bearing unpredictable and uncalculated gifts to us as we walk along, food and flowers at the side door when the child is sick and when we are at our wits end, forgiveness when we clearly messed up and made the mistake, perseverance when life feels like we are in an endless pathless wood, encouragement and inspiration and the ability to see gifts in us that we did not see in ourselves, hope for a kingdom where all its inhabitants flourish and in all that they do, prosper. Like trees standing by streams of water, we can also be a stubborn dense immovable lot with all kinds of warts and blemishes, and yet the miracle of faith is that the grace of God is able to transcend all our faults, flaws, and foibles, and unveil and show us all kinds of other qualities and put people in our lives that we find out we cannot live without. That is what we are dedicating ourselves to when we pledge our resources and our lives to the life together we share in Christian community and to what the church stands for in the world. Which is one more thing worthy of investment...what the church, especially this church stands for in the world. Chaff not only blows whichever the wind blows and doesn't really have much longevity, but it is also nearly invisible. Trees planted by streams of water, on the other hand, are impossible to miss, they are secure in their own skin, they stand for something but are not obnoxious especially when so much of

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Frost, 'Birches,' in *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (1969).

present public discourse resemble a dumpster fire. Trees planted by streams of water thrive by root systems that often overlap and are far from independent organisms but are connected and weaved together by the ties that bind. In his book *the Big Sort*, Bill Bishop reminds us that in a society when all our disagreements and enemies are the same, the potential for civil unrest and destructive fragmentation occur. What he means is that when all our neighbors look alike and agree with us across the board politically and ideologically, when we choose to insulate ourselves around an echo chamber or chorus of people where there is no difference in philosophy or tension surrounding any issues, and if society at-large embraces such a type of approach to life, then the potential for intractable discord and the breakdown of civil society increases exponentially. We need cross currents where we have allies or friends and neighbors where we are sympatico on certain issues but completely at loggerheads on other matters. That is what nourishes the soil of civil society and helps all find their place to flourish whether they are part and parcel of this Christian community or simply standing in the shade of our branches and connected somewhere along the way to our root system. Unfortunately, the 'big sort' has hit churches too and for the last generation or two churches have fallen victim to this polarization and sorting among the like-minded fault lines like the rest of society. But the beauty of churches like this one is that we are not one-minded in all things and have the opportunity to embody a community that lives together, loves each other, and disagrees with each other well when those times come. Few places and communities in our world right now can do that, but we can and we do. Trees planted by streams of water are not just about flourishing in the moment though. They are built to withstand drought, storms, an absent-minded driver backing into one. Trees planted by streams of water are built to flourish well into the future, long after we ourselves have left this earth. Catholic bishop Ken Untener's prayer in remembrance of Oscar Romero reminds us that 'we plant seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds [someone before us] planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something and to do it well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.'<sup>4</sup> We are like trees planted by streams of water, flourishing into a future we cannot see, confidently planted in the ground and reaching forward with hope, until God's kingdom comes.

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<sup>4</sup> Romero Prayer, Bishop Ken Untener, Saginaw, Michigan, November 1979.