

Today we start our annual celebration of Creation. From today through the first Sunday in October we will be focusing on God’s work and God’s presence in the created world.

If I were to ask you what is the biggest living creature, some of you would say the blue whale, and some would debate what actually we mean by living. But I doubt that many of us would immediately say Pando. Pando is a forest, but



all of its 47,000 aspen trees come from a single root system spread over 106 acres in Utah, making it genetically one individual. Pando is also likely to be the world’s oldest living organism, with estimates putting it at between 80,000 and 1 million years old. In case you

didn’t know, “an aspen clone starts with a single seed and spreads by sending up new shoots from the expanding root system. These shoots become trees that are genetically identical.”¹



As with so many of our forests, Pando is under threat; some of the trees are reaching the end of their natural life, disease and insect infestation coupled with years of fire suppression and hungry mouths have taken their toll. Recent research has shown that simply making parts of Pando off limits to herbivores such as deer enables rapid new growth to develop.

Forests are fascinating because they are complex bio-systems. Within the forest, relationships between different plants and animals and other ecological factors lead to healthy growth or not so healthy growth and even death.

If you walk uphill in the Sierras you see that at different levels different trees grow, and with the different trees are different plants and often different birds and other critters.

¹ <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/fishlake/home/?cid=STELPRDB5393641>

You have to get quite high to reach the subalpine zone which starts somewhere 8,000 and 9,500 feet and goes up to around 12,000 where the treeline ends completely. In the subalpine zone you tend to see an open woodland of several conifer species, including as well as areas of granite and other rocks. The climate up there is harsh, with extensive snow and wind. Soils tend to be thin and nutrient-poor. Consequently, trees and plants grow slowly and with more mutual support and less competition than are typical in easier biozones. They are also more susceptible to pollution and changes in the climate.



One of my favorite birds lives in the subalpine Sierra. The Clark's Nutcracker is a loud, raucous bird which is related to crows and ravens. Although the nutcrackers eat insects, berries and even small mammals, as their name suggests, they mainly eat nuts. Not any kind of nut but the seeds of the white pine. They are able to hold pinecones in one or both feet while they open them with their strong beaks.

Clark's nutcrackers store seeds, usually in the ground, for later consumption, in caches of 1–15 seeds. In a good year, a single Clark's bird can cache as many as 98,000 seeds, and is able to remember where they put them up to nine months later and even when the cache is buried under three feet of snow. The birds regularly store more than they actually need as an insurance against seed theft by other animals, as well as low availability of alternative foods. Surplus seed is left in the cache, and if the conditions are right, it may be able to germinate and grow into new trees. Through this activity of caching and over-storing, the bird is essentially farming the white pine, especially the whitebark pine.

This tree is considered to be a keystone species – in other words, it provides the basis for a local ecosystem. Keystone species are plants or animals that are so critical to an ecosystem that the landscape would dramatically change without them. Unfortunately, the white pine is under threat from two sides – a fungal infection, white pine blister rust and a beetle, mountain pine beetle. The beetle breeds more at warmer temperatures so it is an increasing problem. In the Greater Yellowstone Eco-System, half of the whitebark pines have

died. With less whitebark pines there are less Clark's Nutcrackers. With less Clark's nutcrackers there are less whitebark pines. The tree is entirely dependent upon the birds to spread its seeds and so for the growth of new trees.

Forests are remarkable for the many interrelationships like this one. So much so, that perhaps an alternative metaphor for the Body of Christ might be the Forest of Christ.

We are the Forest of Christ; we have been created to show the glory of God where we are planted. We are like Pando... connected by our roots which are in Jesus the Christ. Each of us has different roles to play in the forest – each of us has a different ministry, but when we are each tuning in to the Holy Spirit and listening for how God would have us live, then we get to play our part in the whole. The Clark's nutcrackers don't know that they are planting new trees, they are just making sure that they have a food supply for the winter and spring. None of us knows exactly the effect of our lives, which is why we are called to live every moment as if we were in the presence of God and treat every person as the Christ. Individually we may make little impact but together with the communion of saints, both those who are living in this world and those who have gone ahead of us, we make a powerful difference.

Creation started with the Christ and will find its full completion in the Christ, which is why he is called the Alpha and Omega – the beginning and the end. So our forests are as connected with the Christ as we are. One of our baptismal vows is to seek and serve the Christ in all persons, but perhaps that should be to seek and serve the Christ in all beings. I wonder how it would change our behavior if we began to see forests, copses and individual trees as part of the Christ? Would it make us plant more trees? Or show more respect to the ones we have? How would we think about the tremendous die off of trees in the Sierra? Last year some areas saw as many as 20% of its trees die.

Much of this is due to climate change brought about by human activity. It is too late to prevent the climate from changing. It's already happening. The flooding in Texas and the heat wave we are experiencing here are connected. Weather events are becoming more extreme and the ocean is rising. But it's not too late to prevent it from getting even worse. When we realize our tremendous connection to one another and to the other trees, plants and

critters that make up our ecosystem, we can see that even small actions can have big results.

In 1961, scientist Edward Lorenz was running a numerical computer model to predict weather. He used a rounded up number instead of the full number with all its decimal points and discovered that the results were quite different. This has been called the butterfly effect – the idea that a very small change can lead to very big consequences.

It's easy for us to get seriously discouraged and think that we can't make any difference. But we are never acting on our own. We may feel like individuals, but like the aspens in Pando, we are part of something much bigger. The changes we make to reduce our own carbon footprint by using less energy or by changing to renewable sources have an effect beyond the simple difference in our utility bills and our lifestyle.

As I was coming out of the Emigrant Wilderness on my way down from the High Sierra, I walked through a valley where all the big trees had died. At some time there had been a fire but most had succumbed to drought and beetle. It had been a few years since they had gone and most of them were just tall, rotting trunks. It made me think of Ezekiel's vision of the Valley of Dry Bones. But underneath those big empty hulks were new trees growing up, young pines and aspens, and big shrubs and many wild flowers. I wish now



that I had taken a photo; this shows a little of what I saw. Even though the big trees were dead, underneath new life was happening. That valley will never be the same as it once was. But it is continuing to live. New life is coming.

As our climate warms, trees that once did well at 7,000 feet are dying and when there are birds like the Clark's nutcracker to help, they are starting to grow at higher elevations. A rebirth is happening.

There is much to be hopeful about. As the Body and Forest of Christ we are called to be both pragmatists and visionaries. Our vision reminds us that we are part of Christ, just like the trees and the forests, and that Creation is still

happening. At some point in the future all will be brought into harmony in Christ yet, here and now, God's Spirit is working with us so that even a small change can become something huge. Every little thing is a big thing in the reign of God.

And so we are pragmatists, acknowledging that our stewardship of this planet has been less than exemplary, confessing that we have often exploited others and failed to see Christ in all beings. And for this we repent, asking to be born again with new eyes and new understanding.



And as visionary pragmatists, we commit ourselves to action and to prayer. To play our full individual parts in the forest of Christ, finding ways to live more simply with less waste so that the forests may flourish and the planet may rejoice in the children of God.