

# Plymouth Unitarian Church

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Roots of Faith - Sacred Trees of the  
Bible

## Opening video/music

Forest Music in D Major – HANDEL (YOUTUBE – 2.33 minutes)

## Welcome + Introduction

Today's service, written by Steve, explores the theme of sacred trees in the Bible.

Steve prefers writing services rather than leading them, so members of the congregation will be delivering today's reflections.

Our service is in three parts and will include readings, hymns, music, and several short video clips.

Our opening music was by the baroque composer Georg Friedrich HANDEL called Forest Music in D Major and was chosen especially for the service due to its title.

We start as always with the lighting of our chalice, a symbol of our free religious faith.

Chalice is lit.

## Hymn One

147 from the purple hymn book – Wide Green World

## Opening words

From the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible or what we used to call the Old Testament.

Genesis Chapter two verses 15 to 17 from the Good News Bible.

Then the Lord God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and guard it.

He said to him; you may eat the fruit of any tree in the garden, except the tree that gives knowledge of what is good, and what is bad.

You must not eat the fruit of that tree; if you do, you will die the same day.

## Part A

In the ancient world, sacred trees were everywhere. They were linked with the divine.

The earliest religious expression was animism, which is rooted in indigenous tradition; the belief that a spirit or an essence resides in all natural objects including trees.

Trees were seen as living beings, possessing a spirit, a consciousness, not just a passive object of nature.

In many traditions trees are seen as wise elders or guardians that connect our human world with the spiritual one.

Some trees are even associated with a god, such as oak trees with the Greek god Zeus.

Groves often served as places of worship, ritual, communication with gods and spirits.

Pagans for example saw them as natural temples.

Have you ever looked at a tree and been completely awed by its beauty or size?

We still see trees as sacred, and this can be seen in the public outrage generated when for example an ancient tree is felled.

Look at what happened in Plymouth recently in our city-centre. It felt almost like a desecration.

The Celts saw the cutting down of an enemies sacred tree as an act of war and symbolic conquest.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition trees appear throughout the bible as powerful symbols of life, faith, and divine presence.

Particularly in Judaism they seem to mark moments of encounter with God.

They are holy meeting places. The Garden of Eden would be the best example.

Ask the average person to name a bible story with a tree, and most would say Adam and Eve and the forbidden fruit. After all, it's one of the best-known bible stories.

In the Garden of Eden, God places two trees at the centre of everything. the Tree of Life, and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

The Tree of Life represents unending life, God's provision, and after Adam and Eve's disobedience or what we now term the fall of man, access to the Tree of Life is blocked.

The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil addresses moral authority, human freedom, and obedience to God.

Our lives are full of choices. From the minor daily ones – and there are countless ones - what to wear, eat, how to fill our day.

Behavioural choices – how we treat ourselves, others, animals, our planet.

And then major, even life changing ones – such as education, career, relationships, and children.

You made a choice to come to Church today. And thank you for doing so.

I am sure we have all looked out the window on a Sunday morning and thought - it's too wet and cold.

I just can't be bothered today – I am not in the mood. I can't stand so and so's services.

Then it's, no, I must go; it's Steve's service – he will be so upset if I don't turn up.

I will be racked with guilt the whole day if I don't go.

I might enjoy it. It's only an hour, whilst the guilt will last all day – I will just zone out and smile.

Not matter how bad it is, I will have heard worse.

The choice Adam and Eve made had consequences, both individual, and communal.

And like them, our choices and deeds shape not only our own lives but the world around us.

They leave a legacy — good or bad, and this in summary is the moral of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Our second story about trees is from Genesis Chapter 18 where a son is promised to Abraham under the sacred oak trees of Mamre.

Mamre is located near Hebron in the disputed West Bank, or what Israel calls Judea and Samaria. It's about 30 kilometres from Jerusalem.

It's a flashpoint city, divided between Palestinians and Israelis on an almost apartheid level of separation.

Some of the most radical Israeli settlers live here due to being the site of the Cave of Machpelah, the burial site of Abraham, his wife Sarah, and their descendants.

It's also an important city in Islam and is called AL-KHALIL, the Friend of God, a title given to the Prophet Abraham or Ibrahim in Islam, one of its greatest prophets.

Hebron is also the early capital of King David and because of these links is considered the second-holiest city in Judaism.

Abraham is childless and his wife Sarah has passed the years of childbearing.

Abraham is informed by three men – or are they angelic visitors giving divine tidings of a miraculous birth? Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Verse 10 says – nine months from now, I will come back, and your wife Sarah will have a son.

The prophecy comes to fruition and Isaac is born, a miracle baby.

Abraham becomes the father of a nation.

A covenant was made under those trees – a story of divine encounter, revelation, hospitality, and faith.

And then there is Moses and the burning bush told in the book of Exodus Chapter three.

Once a prince of Egypt, Moses flees for his life after killing an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave.

Seeking refuge, he settled in the land of Midian, where he married and became a shepherd.

In the Sinai desert Moses encounters God, who appears as a burning bush that is not consumed by the flames.

God commands Moses to return to Egypt to lead the Israelites out of slavery and so begins the Exodus – a defining narrative of liberation and identity formation for the Jewish people.

There is a plant called *DICTAMNUS ALBUS* which emits volatile oils especially in hot conditions.

These gases ignite briefly and burn producing visible flames, but the plant is usually unharmed.

Geological faults can release methane or other flammable gases. They can produce flames which hover around vegetation.

Or perhaps an optical or atmospheric effect? Was Moses hallucinating in the desert heat?

The mechanics of the bush are irrelevant really, as again it's about divine presence, revelation, mission, not the actual fire itself.

The motto of the Church of Scotland is *NEC TAMEN CONSUMEBATUR* which sounds like a Harry Potter spell but is in fact Latin for: yet it was not consumed, based on this bible story.

There is amazingly a new year for trees in Judaism, a festival called *TU BISHVAT*.

It's emerged into an ecological awareness day and agricultural holiday.

As a church we celebrate earth day each year, and in the 1980s mainly in America, *TU BISHVAT* has become a Jewish equivalent of earth day.

## Interlude

So, we are now going to have a short piece of music.

It is the famous aria from the opera Serse or Xerxes by Handel which was first performed in 1738 and is called OMBRA MAI FU.

In the opera the Persian King Xerxes sings this aria while admiring a tree. He expresses his gratitude for its gentle, comforting shade.

OMBRA MAI FU – SERSE – English Lyrics – 3.09 minutes (YOUTUBE)

## Hymn 2

147 from the purple hymn book – Spirit of earth, root, stone, and tree.

## Prayer

Instead of a prayer we have a short story about the three types of people you will encounter in your lives.

These are leaf, branch, and root people.

Leaf people.

These people come into your life for a short time.

You can't rely on them because they are not strong. They only take what they need, then they leave.

Branch people.

They seem strong, but they break away when things get tough. They stay for a while, but when life gets harder, they disappear.

Root people.

These are the most important people. They don't help just to get noticed. They stay with you through hard times.

They support you, care for you, and accept you as you are.

Root people stay, no matter what the season.

## Part B

In the second part of our service, we will look at some stories that include trees in the New Testament.

But before we do so, we have a short video clip about Ethiopia's church forests.

[Ethiopia's church forests – BBC World Service – YOUTUBE \(1.49 minutes\)](#).

I am sure you have all heard of the Bible story of Jesus and Zacchaeus, from Luke chapter 19 verses 1 to 10.

As Jesus enters Jericho, a rich tax collector named Zacchaeus can't see over the crowd, so climbs a sycamore tree for a better view.

We have been taught that Zacchaeus was a short man – there is even that famous children's Bible song – Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he.

Some scholars now state that perhaps it was the throng around Jesus that meant he could not be seen, or maybe Jesus was short, but it's not important

Jesus spots him and asks Zacchaeus if he can stay at his house and provide hospitality for him and his disciples.

Zacchaeus is so thrilled, moved, and humbled by this request that he is called to repentance, and makes a pledge to give half his possessions to the poor.

Jesus knew instinctively that people just want to be acknowledged, valued, and above all, loved.

Tax collectors were collaborators of the despised Roman occupiers and would have been hated and shunned by their Jewish neighbours.

It would have only been fear of retribution from Rome that prevented them from being attacked or murdered.

Look at what happened to Nazi collaborators when Europe was liberated, in Northern Ireland during the troubles, or apartheid South Africa.

Even today Palestinians who collaborate with Israel are killed without hesitation.

Another tree is Steve's favourite type. The palm, which he first saw in the Holy Land in the 1970s.

He loves them and thinks they are quite exotic.

When he came to Plymouth in the mid-1980s, he saw a house in the MANNAMEAD neighbourhood going towards MANADON flyover towards CROWNHILL, which looks a bit like a Spanish villa.

You might know the house, it is a bit dated now, maybe even a little bit tacky, but when he saw that palm tree in the garden in 1986, he was so thrilled that he fell quite in love with that house.

The main story with palm trees in the bible of course relates to the first Palm Sunday when Jesus triumphantly enters Jerusalem riding on a donkey.

Crowds welcome him by waving palm branches and singing hosanna.

The palm branches became a sign of messianic victory and hope – later reinterpreted as victory through sacrifice.

Even today in Jerusalem and across the world on Palm Sunday, this procession is reenacted.

Palm trees later became associated with Christian martyrs.

In iconography and art, martyrs are often depicted holding a palm branch – a symbol of victory in faith, a martyr's victory.

The palm has also been seen in catacomb art and in mosaics.

And for Ash Wednesday, the ashes used are usually from the palms distributed on Palm Sunday.

Revelation chapter 7 verse 9 describes the saints in heaven standing before the throne with palm branches in their hands.

And Psalm 92 verse 12 says - the righteous will flourish like a palm tree; they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon.

Palm trees grow upright, can survive in harsh climates and bear fruit, so in summary they came to symbolise a steadfast Christian faith.

And then there's the olive tree.

The night before his arrest, trial and crucifixion Jesus prays on the Mount of Olives in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Parallel to Jerusalem, it's a focal point for Christian pilgrimage and visitors, especially during Easter and is associated with the last week of Jesus's life and his ascension into heaven.

It is home to some of the most historic and beautiful churches in Jerusalem including the distinctive Church of Mary Magdalene, as well as the Church of All Nations, and Chapel of the Ascension.

In biblical times the Mount of Olives served Jerusalem as the site where olive oil was prepared to be used for cooking and in lamps.

An alternate name for the Mount of Olives which is cited in the Jewish Talmud and Midrash is the Mount of Anointment, named after the anointing oil, prepared from the olives that grew there, to anoint kings and high priests.

The Mount of Olives was also the route between Jerusalem and Bethany where Jesus visited Lazarus, Mary, and Martha.

If you ever go to Jerusalem, this is a must-see visit on your tour. It's truly beautiful.

There are still many olive trees in the Garden of Gethsemane, some would be hundreds of years old.

Imagine the events they have seen in their lives, centuries of war and conflict, yet they survive and flourish – powerful symbols of patience and endurance.

Olive wood is used in many if not most souvenirs from the Holy Land, and Steve remembers these souvenirs having a distinctive and quite lovely smell.

One he remembers is a Bible his mother bought for an aunt which had an olive wood cover.

Olive trees remain a major contributor to the Palestinian economy; the olives themselves, the oil, the wood.

Harvesting them has become a flashpoint between Palestinians and radical Israeli settlers attempting to disrupt the harvest, even prevent the Palestinians accessing the land.

And of course, the cross, the symbol of the Christian faith linked to divine encounter and redemption.

The Bible does not state what wood this was made from, but it would likely be olive wood.

### Hymn 3

Our final hymn is a video clip from YOUTUBE called for the beauty of the earth played by Taryn Harbridge.

We are just going to listen to the music for this hymn. Stay seated for this one.

For the beauty of the earth played by Taryn Harbridge - YOUTUBE 4.10 minutes.

## Part C

So, the final part of the service is about the spiritual benefits of trees and the positive impact they can have on both our mental and physical health.

There are around three trillion trees on our planet.

We are cutting down about 45 million trees globally a day, which is about 15 billion a year, and only replanting about five billion, so you do the maths.

This deforestation is driven by agriculture, logging, and urban expansion.

One in three tree species are now threatened with extinction.

If you ever watch news reports about forest fires consuming hundreds, even thousands of acres of our forests, doesn't it make your heart despair?

Trees absorb billions of tonnes of carbon dioxide; they are our planet's lungs, and it takes about 450 mature trees to offset the emission of one human being.

They also filter pollutants like nitrogen oxides, ammonia, and sulphur dioxide.

Trees provide habitats for multiple species, birds, insects, mammals.

In urban areas they can reduce noise pollution as they act as natural sound barriers.

What can you as an individual do to help? Well of course, by using less paper and recycling what we do use.

Choose sustainably sourced wood and paper products, avoid chemicals like pesticides and herbicides near trees.

Support tree-protection laws and organisations. Volunteer with a local tree-planting group and donate to reforestation projects.

You can do something – all of us can.

One local charity in our city is Plymouth Tree People, and we have a short video clip about them to watch.

[Plymouth Tree People – Volunteer Tree Wardens – YOUTUBE 3.12 minutes.](#)

Have you heard of forest bathing? It's a Japanese term SHINRIN-YOKU and originated in the 1980s.

It is the practice of spending slow mindful time in a forest or natural environment to improve your physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing.

It is immersing your senses in nature.

It's important to remember that forest bathing is NOT hiking or intense physical exercise.

You walk slowly; you can even sit amongst the trees.

Notice the sounds. Pause and close your eyes.

What do you hear?

Birds maybe?

Insects buzzing?

The sound of tree branches swaying in the breeze? Are they talking slowly like old lovers with new things to say.

Steve didn't make that up by the way – it was a quote he found online that he absolutely loved and had to incorporate into the service.

Smell the forest. That particularly wonderful smell after rainfall.

It has a term – petrichor – a pleasant earthy scent caused by an organic compound called geosmin, and we humans are incredibly sensitive to its smell.

Admire the colours as you forest bathe. They will depend on the season you are walking in.

Breathe deeply and be present in this moment.

Only this moment. Not regret about the past or worry about the future.

Let go of all goals and distractions. Savour this wonderful connection with nature.

Forest bathing can reduce stress and anxiety and lower your blood pressure.

It can help with depression and burnout as trees release PHYTONCIDES, natural compounds which can improve our moods.

Trees release these chemicals to protect themselves from insects and pathogens, but they have a positive effect on us.

Perhaps one hot summer Sunday day – yes, we do get them in Plymouth at least a few times a year – you could go to a local park and forest bathe.

If you are physically able, take a walk in Mount Edgcumbe country park or the grounds of the nearby National Trust property at SALTRAM.

The National Trust property in COTEHELE is also truly beautiful to walk in.

And remember, that a forest bath is more of an immersion of your senses than physical exercise, so take it slowly.

Woodland burials are now quite popular – sometimes called natural, green, or eco burials.

They take place in a natural woodland or meadow setting. They are mainly designed to have minimal environmental impact.

I think one of our congregation, Suzanne had one, and Steve would like to dedicate this service to her memory.

Thank you for listening.

## Closing words

Our closing words are from the Hebrew Bible, the book of Jeremiah Chapter 17 verses 7-8 from the New International Version.

But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in Him.

They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream.

It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green.

It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.

## Closing music

We don't have any closing music, but a video clip on the benefits of tree hugging.

It's called why hugging a tree feels wonderful.

Steve says after watching this video he is going to try and be brave enough to hug a tree next time he is walking in Mount Edgumbe. Hopefully he won't be spotted by a passerby.

[Why hugging a tree is wonderful – YOUTUBE 1.58 minutes.](#)

## Chalice is extinguished

## Notices + Tea and Coffee