

## Fatherly Advice from a Shaggy Bark Juniper

Preached FCCW June, 16, 2019 (Father's Day and Trinity Sunday)

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31 and Romans 5:1-5

Much of the Book of Proverbs is written in the style of fatherly wisdom that is intended to shape the character of children so that they may grow to be in alignment with God's purpose for their lives. So, you can see why Proverbs can be a treasure trove of material for a Father's Day sermon.

It may seem strange then, that on this Father's Day, the passage we read from Proverbs is all about a woman. This is not just any woman, though. Or, even an actual woman. She is a personification of Godly wisdom. Like the way we would use the name "Mother Nature" to describe the natural world. Or, "Lady Luck" to speak about good fortune. The "Wisdom Woman" of Proverbs is described as having been there when God created the universe, and created life. It is a way of saying that Divine Wisdom is in the very DNA of the universe.

Psalms 19 echoes this theme where it says:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;  
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.

That's the inspiration behind this summer sermon series, which I have named, "What I Learned on My Summer Vacation." The premise that a

wisdom for gaining a life lived in alignment with God's perfect purpose for us is calling out to be heard, day and night. That this wisdom is hidden in plain sight all around us.

Many people talk about the way they feel closer to God when they are out in nature. For me, one of the places where I have most definitely heard God's wisdom speaking to me through nature has been Sedona, Arizona.

Does anyone else remember being assigned those Back-to-School compositions about what you did on your Summer vacation? This sermon series is a little like that. Except, it's not so much about what *I did* on my recent vacation to Sedona—as it is about what was *revealed to me* about God's wisdom through the things I experienced there. Beginning with a simple tree called the Shaggy Bark Juniper, which is a tree common to the desert environment of Arizona.

One day, during a group hike through Red Rock country, our trail guide—Cherlita—called our attention to a shaggy bark Juniper that grew alongside the dusty trail. Shaggy Bark Junipers get their name from the shredded appearance of their bark. But their most distinctive feature is the gnarly trunk, which twists into a spiral pattern as it grows. Someone asked why the Juniper's trunk twists like some wooden Twizzler. Cherlita answered with a bit of folk wisdom. She explained that when the Juniper seed takes root it sends down a stout taproot to find water. The arid, rocky soil forces the root to twist and contort itself in its search for moisture. The coiling action of the root then sets a pattern for the growth of the whole tree; so that the unseen, underground, twisting and turning of the roots around obstacles is reproduced in the visible, above ground pattern of growth in the whole tree. It's as if in the secret place buried in sand and stone where the seedling seeks after what it needs to thrive, the tree's very DNA is

altered; so that the part of the Juniper's life, which is lived in the light of day, is shaped by the memory of the struggle for survival from which it emerged.

Which is a lesson that is equally applicable to people.

The writer of the First Psalm says that people who delight in the Lord are like the tree planted by the stream because their relationship to God nurtures their spirit the way the fruitful tree is nourished by the flowing waters. But not everyone is fortunate enough to be born into such fertile ground. Many of our formative experiences are more like the Juniper seedling's, dark, twisting and turning quest through arid environments and around obstacles, as we pursue a vaguely defined impulse to know ourselves as beloved children of God.

Like the Juniper's roots, these formative experiences are invisible, either because they are buried in the dim memories of our early lives, or in the silent depths of our souls. Yet, they become intertwined with the DNA of who we are in ways that are as evident on the outside as the spiraling trunks and branches of the desert Juniper.

When writing to Christians in Rome, the Apostle Paul encouraged them to bring their painful experiences out into the light of day, instead of letting them take root within them. He went so far as to say that they should be seen as something to boast about, rather than as a cause of secret shame. He claimed that "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope."

But not everyone's journey follows that pattern. For many people, suffering births exhaustion rather than endurance. Suffering breeds character all right—but a character that hopes in the wrong things, or lacks any hope at all.

But Paul's words were addressed to people who had experienced the love of God and based on that experience of God's love sought to live in alignment with it, without being defined by their struggles and suffering. Which is why, the wisdom crying out from the Shaggy Bark Juniper is well suited for a Father's Day message; given the unique opportunity fathers possess for nurturing the spiritual and emotional maturity of sons and daughters.

The Bible contains many examples of fatherhood. Surprisingly, perhaps, most of them are highly imperfect role models whose imperfections were repeated across generations until they became the DNA of their family tree. Even more surprising is the fact that the most important father figure in the Bible is the one we may actually know the least about.

That would be Joseph, who was chosen to be the earthly father of Jesus. Not a single spoken word of his is recorded anywhere in the Gospels. The only clue we have to Joseph's character is that he is described as being "a righteous man." Which tells us he tried to live his life in alignment with God's purpose for him.

There are only two kinds of scenes where Joseph ever appears. Either he is shown as responding in faithful obedience to some instruction he receives from God (like to take Mary as his wife) or he is observed fulfilling his fatherly obligation to raise Jesus in an environment of faith, such as bringing him to be circumcised as the Law of Moses prescribed, or taking him on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem every year to celebrate the Passover. Everything else about Joseph is as deeply buried in the sands of time as the Juniper's roots are buried in red soil of Sedona.

You may be thinking, "What's there to tell about Joseph? How hard could it have been to raise *Jesus*?" This being Trinity Sunday, as well as Father's Day, we should be reminded of the great mystery that

although Jesus was fully God in the flesh, he was, at the same time, also fully human.

In Luke's Gospel we find one of the rare references to Jesus' formative years between his birth in Bethlehem and the beginning of his adult ministry in Galilee. Luke summarizes those thirty hidden years of Jesus' life in these words: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor."

If Jesus *increased in wisdom* that must mean that even though he was fully God, the fully human part of him required that his understanding of who he was had to be nurtured like any other child. Judging by the way Jesus turned out, I guess it's safe to say that Joseph did a more than OK job!

So, on this Father's Day, let us heed the fatherly wisdom of the Shaggy Bark Juniper, teaching us that of all the responsibilities that come with fatherhood, there is none that possesses a greater potential for ensuring that your daughters and sons will grow to align their lives with God's purpose for them than the responsibility to be as actively involved in their faith formation as Joseph was in being an example of a faithful Jew to Jesus.

May the Shaggy Bark Juniper wisdom guide fathers in their responsibility to leading children in their care to the knowledge that they are God's beloved children no matter what obstacles may deflect them from that awareness; and to nourish their roots in the living waters of a relationship to God.

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