

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Redeemer. Amen. One thing about moving to Alabama that I wasn't prepared for was the sheer number of trees. Uh, I don't really know what I was expecting. Uh, probably more than New Jersey, but fewer than Michigan. But it only took a few hours of driving into the state from the north in early September 2022 to overwhelm me. They're everywhere. 16 billion, billion of them according to AI. Even more than Michigan. Alabama has the third largest woodland acreage in the country, uh, even after Hurricane Isaias took out two and a half million tons of timber. I love trees. They're just, like, so tree-like. Solid, dependable, beautiful, and useful. Uh, the more, the better as far as I'm concerned. So imagine my sadness when I was living in Pennsylvania and lost five giants. Not the kind of giant that says, "Fee-fi-fo-fum," although that kind does smell the blood of Englishmen, and so it's always good to relieve the world of one of those. No, these were gentle giants. They didn't galump through the countryside swinging clubs and climbing beanstalks. Truth be told, they weren't the giant-est of giants. They were only 25 feet tall, and they were only 30 years old. That's what their rings told me, because giants have rings that talk. But giants don't talk as loudly as technology, and so because my giants threatened to damage some electrical power lines, they had to go, even though it would still be years before any of them got within touching distance of the cables. I guess it made economic sense to destroy them then while the foresters were in my neighborhood. Efficiency required it. There was no rite of passage to mark their departure from God's earth. No funeral was conducted with teary family and mourning community. Just a leaflet through my door, a courtesy phone call, and that was that. I came home one day and my giants were gone. I don't even know where the bodies were taken or what use they were put to. I read on Wikipedia that hemlocks, for that is what they were, make good pulp, which can become paper. Knowledge, wisdom, art. That would be a good end, to be reborn as a book that educates a child who grows up to discover a cure for

cancer, or becomes the canvas for a breathtaking painting, or a manuscript for inspiring music. Maybe the tissue that dries the eyes of the brokenhearted, or the napkin on which is written the great love song. Then my giants would not have died in vain. Then they would be the seeds of new birth. Hemlocks don't bear fruit, but their dead bodies might do what their branches could not: bring life and joy and goodness to humankind long after their deaths. No one knows who wrote Psalm 1 that we've just heard sung, but whoever they were, they too were tree lovers. Happy are those who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seats of the scornful. Their delight is in the law of the Lord. They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither. Everything they do shall prosper. The righteous person, the lover of God, we'd say the follower of Christ, says the poet, is like a tree planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season with leaves that do not wither. They bear fruit at the right time, but their leaves do not wither. That's odd, I thought. Trees that bear fruit shed their leaves, don't they? Every fruit tree I could think of sheds its leaves. But actually, I was wrong. Uh, there are some evergreen fruit trees. The avocado, the mango, and the lychee are to name nearly all of them. But the poet has never seen any of these. They were introduced, uh, to the Middle East after Bible times. But there is a fourth that is much more familiar and must be the tree the poet is meditating on when he writes Psalm one: the olive tree. It produces edible fruit, it is an evergreen, and it is all over the poet's native land. The olive tree is a powerful symbol. It turns up when Noah's flood is subsiding in the beak of a dove. There, it's a symbol of peace, of hope, of a new start. Israel's kings were anointed with the oil of olives at their coronations, so this tree and its fruit symbolize the calling of God's people. In the New Testament, the letter of James, the writer says, "Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders who will anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord." We are planted and cultivated to be olives, channels of healing, messengers of hope, people who proclaim

new starts and practice peace. We are the olive trees in this hurting and fractured world, bringing reconciliation to the alienated, hope to the despairing, new starts to those who feel shame, futures for those who are surveying the burnt-out remains of their dreams, justice for the victims, belonging to the marginalized. Here, in this picture of an olive, there is our calling, our joyful duty, our high privilege as co-workers with God to bring healing to the brokenhearted, release to those who are captive by destructive habits, self-defeating thinking, and behaviors that cause them and other people needless pain. We pour ourselves out like soothing olive oil on the dehumanizing structures that exclude or exploit or manipulate. Here, in this picture of an olive, is our purpose for living. If you are breathing this morning, this is why. To be the healing, peacemaking teller of good news to those in your world. The word of the Lord today is this, "Be the tree." Olives, that is, and not my old hemlocks. Hemlocks are fruitless. Their gift to mankind is their legacy. They become useful when they've gone. No, we are those olive trees, the trees whose leaves do not wither and who bear fruit in good season. Now, trees don't bear fruit for their own benefit. Trees don't eat their own fruit. The fruit is for others, for birds, and for animals, and for humans. Our fruit, the good things that God grows in us, they aren't for us to enjoy. They're for us to give away. Those beautiful fruits that God grows in us, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. These are meant for our friends to enjoy, our families, our clients, our colleagues, acquaintances, and neighbors. They are the people who will eat your fruit. They will sample your patience. They will taste your kindness. They will feast on your goodness, and they will see God in you. They will, as another psalm says, taste and see that the Lord is good. Our fruit is for giving away. Apparently, there is a species of tree in Australia called the river red gum tree. It's in the eucalyptus family. I've never seen one. I've never been to Australia. But I have found some pictures online, and this tree is huge, growing up to one hundred and sixty feet tall with a diameter that can be as

much as ten feet. It has massive canopies providing shelter for birds. The river red gum can survive for a thousand years, and it grows hollows in its trunk, sometimes taking over one hundred and fifty years to form, and these hollows are a paradise for hundreds of species of birds, bats, and mammals. The indigenous people call this sheltering wildlife the fruit of the tree. I'm inspired by that. Wouldn't that be a beautiful thing for a church? Our fruit is the people that we serve and bless and shelter and protect. People would know us by the good we did, the folks we helped, the small ways we called our city to God. What a great legacy for a parish. Yes, we have a magnificent building filled with lots of splendid things. But what if our true legacy was people saved from despair, danger, and need? One more thing about trees. When a tree drops its fruit and gives it to creation, creation returns it. An apple falls to the ground. An opportunistic deer eats it. It wanders to new grazing land, does what comes naturally to deer, and the apple seed is planted in a new incubator where it takes root, and in the silence and the dark, it begins a new life. It's a law of nature. As we give, so we receive. The tree receives the thrill of giving, and then in a roundabout way, receiving through its legacy. This is the law not just for fruit trees, but for all of life, including humans. In sowing, we reap. In giving, we receive. So when you allow the people to taste your fruit, your peace, your gentleness, your faithfulness, you will enjoy beautiful returns. It's the law. It's why the people who walk with integrity in verse one of the Psalm are happy. Isn't that a great word to start a Psalm with? Happy. Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked. Happiness is a by-product of seeking higher things. God, love, relationship, peace, justice. We Christians, Christians don't just grow fruit for our own sakes. We don't follow Christ for what we get out of it. But we do, by happy consequence, receive all manner of good things from God as a by-product of our love. Everything they do shall prosper, the reading ends. Everything they do shall prosper. So how do we be this tree whose leaves never fail, whose fruits never fall, and that prospers in all

it does? Well, the answer is there in the second verse of the Psalm. Their delight is in the law of the Lord, and they meditate on his law day and night. We soak up the water of prayer, scripture reading, meditation, worship. We show up here because when we take communion, we drink the life-giving water. This is how we stay rooted by the river. We need that daily and weekly reservoir. And finally, we take a lesson from the giant sequoia tree. A few years ago, I stood next to the largest living thing on dry land, the General Sherman Sequoia in California. Now, sequoias have a shallow root system, and the way they withstand the storms and the stress of hundreds of years is that they intertwine their roots with each other's. They literally draw their strength from each other Giving it away, receiving it back with roots, roots that tap deep resources and that are interlinked with others. Be the tree. Amen