

Finding Beauty and Wisdom in Nature

Into Your Hands | Archbishop Robert G. Casey

There is something special about trees. My love for them can be traced back to childhood summer days spent playing in the white pine forest on my grandfather's farm, to sacred moments spent in the woods of Pacem in Terris retreat center, and to days spent backpacking along the Superior Hiking Trail in northern Minnesota. Trees are counted among the teachers of my life. As one walks through the woods, whether in the whispers of the aspens or the rustling of the oaks, life lessons are sure to be learned.

Trees require both roots and branches. Roots set deep will hold the tree secure, helping a tree to let go of any worry about the storms or winds that may come. Branches allow a tree to grow, helping a tree to reach out in new directions, to seek the light, and to provide shade and shelter for others.

Like trees, we also need to be rooted. When we set ourselves on a firm foundation, we will have no fear of any challenges our life may bring. With roots planted in eternal truths, deep history, and ancient wisdom, we can continually tap into the rich lessons that God has taught past generations for millennia.

Despite their importance, we cannot simply rely on our roots. The stability they provide encourages us to grow. We must set our sights outward to unfamiliar territory, stretching forward like a tree's branches and expanding our understanding of who we are and how we relate to the world around us.

American poet Howard Nemerov's poem "Trees" offers an image of trees that might assist in our own self-reflection, allowing us to discover the wisdom trees can teach about truth, goodness, and beauty.

*To be a giant and keep quiet about it,
To stay in one's own place;
To stand for the constant presence of process
And always to seem the same;
To be steady as a rock and always trembling,
Having the hard appearance of death
With the soft, fluent nature of growth,
One's Being deceptively armored,
One's Becoming deceptively vulnerable...*

Nemerov's poem says quite a bit about humanity, not just trees. Sharing the same Creator, our human family might look to the beauty of nature for wisdom. Armored with truth and firmly planted, we are strong. Yet, the charity and love we are called to exercise make us vulnerable. We surrender ourselves through every season, whether that comes in the shedding of leaves—moments of finding ourselves humbled before others—or the sharing of fruit—moments when we can be a blessing for others.

The Tree of Life, found in the Book of Genesis and on the hill of Calvary, serves as a powerful symbol for us in our faith journey. From the first days of creation to the final days of resurrection, God accompanies us through the many seasons of life—in our living, our growing, and our dying—continually strengthening and sustaining us. Christ, who spoke at the dawn of creation and

speaks to us from the Cross, promises us new life. The Spirit, blowing through our branches, reminds us that we are both “steady as a rock and always trembling.”

Whether experienced in a blessed encounter with the beauty of God’s creation or in a sacred moment of meditation before a crucifix, the Tree of Life informs us of God’s will for us, that we may remain rooted in faith as we rise to our call.