

June 14, 2009

Mark 4:26-34

Knock on Wood

"Knock on wood." But which wood?

It depends on what your spiritual state is.

We've all had some of "those" days.

You wake up with an inexplicable crick in your neck. After ten minutes in front of the mirror, you resign yourself to the fact that it's a "bad hair day."

Sure enough, coffee leaps at your shirt during the first morning meeting you attend. The copier eats your paperwork. Your boss/friend/spouse decides today is the day to talk to you about your future -- specifically whether you have one or not.

It's the kind of day that makes us all want to run home, lock ourselves in our room and watch old movies while eating an entire carton of ice cream

If we were to compare ourselves to any tree on days like these, it would have to be a willow -- all bent over as though weighted down by the burdens of life.

We can't be "pillars of strength" or "cedars of Lebanon" every day. There are times when being strong and unswayed are not only impossible, but is inappropriate -- even dangerous to our well-being.

Grief counselors working with those who have lost friends or family urge people not to be strong and get on with their life until they have had a chance to mourn.

The human spirit, like any living thing, occasionally needs a dormant period before it can start another cycle of growth.

The parable of the mustard seed reminds us that there are a lot of living images available to help us define our stages of spiritual growth.

Even if we just restrict ourselves to "trees," we find their tremendous diversity offers more than enough varieties to describe our souls' ups and downs.

(1)There are Poplar Days. (2)There are Oak Days.

(3)And there are Yew Days.

(1)Poplar Days -- There are times when it is far better to be a poplar than a sturdy cedar. Poplars are trees of beginnings. In areas that have been burned or clear cut, poplars are among the first to cover the scarred landscape with new growth.

Poplars propagate so quickly because the stumps and roots of fallen trees still sprout vigorously. They also thrive in these recovering areas because they crave light, and with no competing neighbors, poplars grow rapidly.

But poplars are also fairly short-lived.

In natural mixed-forest settings, as other slower growing trees begin to top the poplars, they die out for lack of light. The leaves of poplars also remind us of their frailty.

Like that of their relative, the aspen, poplar leaves are affixed with compressed stems that make them tremble and dance in the slightest breeze.

The beauty of these tall, delicate trees, reaching straight towards heaven, has made several species popular with landscapers.

Even if you are no horticulturist, you probably can recall careful lines of torch- like Lombardy poplars marking someone's long driveway or fence line.

Can you recall a "poplar period" in your life? A time when you saw the light of some goal shining and you went for it with all your might.

It takes single-minded determination to get through college, get through graduate school, and pass the state boards.

Athletes with Olympic dreams also focus all their energies and efforts on reaching that specific goal. We can grow tremendously during a "poplar period," but it is generally only in one direction.

There comes a time when we have to learn how to branch out, or like the poplar, when others begin to catch up to and even surpass our achievements, our spirit will suffer.

(2)Oak Days -- Oaks probably represent to us what the cedars meant to the biblical writers. We see them as the trees of the strong, mature forest.

The strength and beauty of their wood makes it highly desirable. The living tree is also considered a great beauty. In silhouette there is nothing like the oak.

Unlike most trees the mature oak is often as wide as it is tall -- it reaches out over the earth and up towards the heavens in equal proportions.

Oaks were often believed to be the trees of the gods because lightning strikes oak trees more than any other variety.

In some native American tribes, the people searched diligently for Thunderbird eggs under oak trees after every lightning storm had passed.

As imposing as oaks are, it is surprising to realize that over a quarter of all members of the oak genus are not trees at all, but shrubs. They have the same gifts of hard wood, beautiful design, and even nutritious fruit, but on a much smaller scale.

Those who have learned to balance the joys and demands of a life that includes being a parent, having a career, caring for a home, volunteering for church and community, and nurturing their own soul are true oaks.

The silhouette they cast over all who depend on them seems to offer protection and speak of strength.

It is ironic that this same far-reaching pose makes them all the more susceptible to lightning strikes.

(3) Yew Days –

Yews are a rather inconspicuous genus of evergreen shrubs and trees.

They have long been prized as ornamental plants, and used for hedges in formal gardens, like those quaint topiaries trimmed into the shapes of animals or flowers or spirals.

But yew wood has also been long prized by archers as the premier material for long bows. It is tough and resilient.

The yew has two quite opposite reputations. Traditionally, it has been a symbol of long life, even immortality. In British churches the yew often substituted for palm fronds on Palm Sunday.

This same association with immortal life resulted in the common practice of planting yew trees in the midst of cemeteries and church yards.

But yews also have symbolized death. Yew wood has been commonly used for building caskets. Due to the presence of the alkaloid toxin, yews are considered to be poisonous.

"Slips of yew" were a prime ingredient in the witches brew in Macbeth.

Only in the past few years have these opposing forces of life and death in the yew finally been reconciled. This relatively insignificant tree is now the source of one of the most promising of cancer-fighting drugs, taxol.

The mustard seed parable is also the parable of the mustard plant. Both the tiny seed and the oversized shrub are unlikely representations of God's coming kingdom.

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Let's not try to make the mustard plant into something bigger and stronger than it is -- Jesus found it perfectly useful and capable of bearing the image of the kingdom of God just as it was.

After all, we don't use the tiny mustard seed as an image of strength but as a sign of faith -- faith that God can use the smallest and frailest, the fastest, the slowest, the strongest and the weakest to help bring in the kingdom.

One of the biggest celebrity couples of the 1930's, 40's and 50's had two children; a boy and a girl

The boy never aged and his lifeless body sits on display in the Smithsonian Museum. His name is Charlie McCarthy. His sister is the beautiful and talented Candice Bergen.

Their father was the legendary ventriloquist Edgar Bergen.

Candice Bergen describes her childhood in her best selling autobiography "Knock Wood".

Imagine growing up as the world's most interesting siblings - Charlie McCarthy and his sister Candice Bergen. Charlie was the center of attention and had his own bedroom, clothes, and whatever else his heart desired.

Yet Candice was able to rise on her own and is probably better known today than her brother Charlie.

For me this is more a story of faith than strength. God does use us and need all of us. Both beauty and ugliness. God does not care so much about our past, but our future.

"Knock on Wood" was an ancient ritual to communicate with the various gods for good luck. Today "Knock on Wood" has been translated into every major language and is used in most cultures around the world.

Next time you "Knock on Wood" let it be a reminder to increase your faith in God's every growing kingdom

The Kingdom among us and the Kingdom to come.

AMEN!

