

Healed and Standing Tall

Saint Luke - Healing Sunday
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

October 14, 2007
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 35:5-8; Psalm 124; 2 Timothy 4:5-11

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and Our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

They were impressive to see—giant Hemlock trees, some nearly 300 years old, many over 100 feet tall, their trunks often more than two feet in diameter. Last Sunday afternoon, my family and I hiked a remote part of the Tuscarora State Forest in the western corner of Perry County. Go there, and you will find a 120 acre tract of land containing a stand of Hemlock trees that has never been timbered. Much of Perry County was timbered during the lumbering heyday of the late 1800's, but this stand of Hemlock trees remained undisturbed, in its natural state, and in 1973 it was designated as a Natural Landmark by the National Park Service.

Now, while the Hemlocks have not been cut down for lumber, that doesn't mean there isn't death and decay. If you look up—high up—you will see many of the trees have no foliage. The trees are bare. There is no canopy of needle-laden branches to stop the sun from reaching straight down to the forest floor. The Hemlocks are dying.

All because a tiny little insect known as the wooly adelgid has infested Hemlock trees throughout Pennsylvania. The wooly adelgid sucks the juices out of the tree's twigs, causing the needles to dry up and drop off. The tree becomes a skeleton and dies. But you don't recognize it's happening because, at first glance, looking straight on at the Hemlock trees, you'd think they were healthy and strong.

Isn't that the way it is with us? At first glance, you look around this room and most of us appear relatively healthy and strong, sturdy and energetic. But is the reality . . . something different? What has sapped out of you the very things you need for life? Are you facing a medical concern that consumes you, coloring everything else in your world? Is there a relationship with someone dear that is rocky, to put it mildly, and attempts to resolve the tension have not succeeded? Do you stand tall here in this present place and time but feel lonely? Do you look into your future and feel hopeless? Or is there just "stuff" in your life—the little, nagging stuff, like little wooly adelgids—and that "stuff" has affixed itself onto you, sapping your energy, trying your patience, souring your mood, frustrating you and your efforts, making you just want to chuck it all away someday?

At first glance, you and I might not notice the death and decay going on in the lives of the people around us here, or even in ourselves. But you can be certain—there is need for healing. I suppose that some of us, maybe many of us, come here to worship because there is a sense deep inside us that we need that healing, that something. And that it is something we cannot provide for ourselves. But it is something that God can provide.

The Psalmwriter expresses all that in our Psalm this morning. The Psalmist admits that, if God **wasn't** on our side, we would be swallowed up and overcome in danger. The Psalmist writes both of our powerlessness, and then our need to rely ultimately on God in the face of every enemy. And so we read together this morning: *Our help is from the Lord, who made the heavens and the earth.*

The prophet Isaiah took it a step further. Not just protection from danger and enemies, but now he spoke about redemption and new life. In our first lesson, he envisioned a world where God's redeeming work made deserts bloom with life, and broken people dance and sing for joy. Then Isaiah proclaimed that the mighty acts of God would bring his chosen people Israel back from exile, back from hopelessness and despair, back from death-in-life, and make for them a way home to God. It was to be a healing of a deeper sort than physical or mental healing alone.

What Isaiah prophesied as a highway home is known to us as Jesus Christ. Christ's love for us, witnessed in the stories we tell, tasted in the meal we eat, experienced in the communal life we share, is a sign of God's love for the whole world and us, his creation. Jesus Christ has been sent into this world to provide that deeper sort of merciful healing that our bodies and spirits need and that our gracious God desires for us.

Now, will our anointing, laying on of hands and praying for you in Jesus' name cure your very specific ill? I do not know the answer to that question. This is not some backwoods revival where Vicar Mike and I will tell you to throw away your crutches, or someone will testify that their disease has suddenly vanished into thin air. But we do and will proclaim the power of God to bring wholeness, mercy, and peace to you, the power of God to fill you in those empty places where life, hope, and joy have been sapped away. We do and will declare in the courts of the Lord's house that you and I, all of us, will find ourselves standing taller and stronger this day, because our help comes from the Lord who made the heavens and the earth. **AMEN.**