

# FIRST FRUITS FESTIVAL CELEBRATION

Shalom Community Church

Gretchen's House

May 7, 2017

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## Opening Remarks

*Steve Thomas*

From the first to the last chapters of the Bible, trees play an important part in creation. Beyond their practical importance, trees symbolize a strong, mature and fruitful life (Psalm 1). Their form with roots that reach into the earth and branches that reach into the sky remind us of our connection between earth and the heavens, calling us to be grounded and to reach out to receive life-giving light.

Our culture prefers trendy and short-lived exotic trees—like the Bradford Pear—but this tree is a slow to grow but long to live native tree with much greater value. This is an oak—specifically a swamp white oak (*Quercus bicolor*). Planting trees are a long-practiced act of hope. This is especially true of planting oaks, requiring extra patience with a vision for what these trees eventually become.

An oak is a climax tree in this ecoregion as one can observe around Ann Arbor and in its logo. Oaks are slow to grow and long to live; contrast to silver maple (no offense Joe and Elena). This oak tolerates compacted clay on this site due to construction.

Drought-resistant for dry hot summers we may suffer and more tolerant of wet ground than most trees; high in both landscape and wildlife value, in contrast to the Bradford Pear—which is weak, invasive, and hosts few insects. With their leaves and acorns, oaks feed a multitude of insects, birds and mammals. This produces sweet acorns.

The canopy and trunk (eventually producing cavities in its old age) provide lots of shelter. It is a strong, durable tree; while this is one of the hardiest oaks, it will eventually decline and die, but still will have great benefit with its highly valued lumber with exceptional strength and beauty; or if left to decompose, it will become a nourishing part of the life cycle and to enrich the soil beneath it.

As we enter into a new stage of its journey, may Shalom flourish and like this tree: strong, fruitful, long-lived, a source of sustenance and shelter, resilient in drought and tough conditions, rooted and grounded in God's good earth and reliant on God's heavenly light.

## Tree Stories

*Nelson Shantz, Deb Landis Lewis, Danny Hollander*

### ***I. Materiality***

We've considered trees as living things that shape the ecosystem of their location. We may also consider trees for harvest as a renewable resource. They provide material for art, for craft, for building and construction, for food and flavoring, for preserving and aging food and drink.

Consider the oak. Probably every one of us lives in a home with something in it made of oak: furniture, flooring, paneling, trim work, steps, a serving platter. It is hardwood, durable, and beautiful to the eye with dramatic grain and color. We walk on it, lean against it, store books on it. We serve food on a board or in a bowl cut from it. We may have drunk wine or spirits that have drawn flavor from oak casks. We may have salvaged a piece of old, worn, wobbly furniture. We would have repaired, refinished, and now re-use a legacy from another craftsman and another generation.

We live in the stream of humankind, and human endeavor. With reflection, we may recognize in this the intent and bounty of God's creation. With care and diligence, we may use this bounty for our own sustenance, and return a portion to God for the well being of all.

## ***II. A tree for our time and place***

This location has been our gathering place for a number of years. It will be for some time to come, though probably not forever. It is a human impulse to mark one's passage. God's chosen people built alters, raised Ebenezers—a stone of help—as they roamed. While we will one day move on, this tree, rooted into this soil, will be a beautiful and life-giving mark of our time here. We pray that our sojourn here will likewise be beautiful and life giving.

## ***III. But what if it dies?***

As we explore all these evocative ways to bring symbolic meaning to this tree, it may occur to us that the tree may not survive. It is a stressful thing to uproot a tree, reduce its root system, short it on water and nutrition. Transplanting requires care and on-going attention.

The location and soil conditions need to be assessed; an appropriate variety of tree chosen; a specimen with good root and branch configuration selected. It must be properly planted, then watered and tended in the weeks and months to come, even as our focus turns to other tasks and interests.

With all of this, the tree still may not survive. We could conclude that it's not worth the risk, the expense, or the disappointment. But we might also ask what this could teach us.

In the decision-making model we have used for 2 decades, there is a stage called "Waiting." It applies to the time that follows a decision. It counsels us to do 3 things:

1. Watch for signs of affirmation; does the decision bear fruit?
2. Embark on spiritual reflection; discern if the decision reflects God's will.
3. Watch for feelings of desolation or feelings of consolation. If desolation, it is a sign to return to the process. If consolation, it is a sign to celebrate.

This perspective grounds us with hope, with purpose, with resolve, and with trust in the Spirit to guide us.

## **Tree Planting**

*Congregation, with children leading the way*

### **Blessing**

*Trevor Bechtel*

Creator God, you having been focusing our attention on trees since the very beginning of time. Bless the life of this tree so that it may be a symbol for us of the climax of your attention, slow to grow but also a sign of stability and resilience, sure in place but also a mark of passage. Let this tree grow straight and tall to remind us of all the benefits oak trees provide for us, and the gifts of human creativity that stem from your creation. Bless this tree so that it may be a symbol of renewal for us. And in the event that the tree dies, let us watch for affirmation and reflection, for desolation and consolation. Let us not forget the fruits of this tree, even though we humans cannot eat them. God of the squirrel, bless the fruitfulness of this tree. Grant strength to this tree so that it may in turn bless us. Move both of our lives to grow along the grain of the universe and in so doing give you glory. Amen.