

When a team of experts was called in to examine the country's oldest living oak tree this was their report. They said, when it comes to any tree, *We know how to reconstruct their past. But we don't know how to predict their future.*¹ The oldest oak tree in America appears to be dying, which isn't surprising in itself. What's surprising is that no one knows *why* it's dying — and the tree is 600 years old! That means it was already centuries old when it served as a preaching site during the Great Awakening of the 1740's. It was already older than our country is *today* when it served as a training site for George Washington's troops in the Revolution. "Through war and natural disaster and a thousand storms or more, the tree survived."

That's what makes it so surprising that after 600 years it recently entered "a spiral of decline." People are already grieving the tree like the loss of a family member. Because despite all of its strength & resilience, despite all of the tender loving care that people have demonstrated, when it comes to any tree: *we just don't know how to predict their future.*

I couldn't help hearing the story as a parable for the Church. After all when Jesus showed up in ancient Israel announcing the Kingdom of Heaven, plenty of people were sure that God's people were already in "a spiral of decline." Their once proud heritage as heirs of Abraham, Isaac, & Jacob; their prophetic deliverance from slavery in Egypt by Moses; their royal pedigree from kings David & Solomon — all of that already seemed like ancient history when Jesus showed up, proclaiming: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," (Matt. 4.17).

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/a-town-tries-to-care-for-and-let-go-of-its-oldest-resident--a-600-year-old-oak/2016/06/27/a7fc4dcc-3a1a-11e6-8f7c-d4c723a2becb_story.html

Despite all the signs that God's people had entered a spiral of decline, the Gospels invite us to hear a surprising future that no one could predict. Despite all the signs of death, the Gospels invites us to hear Jesus' ministry as the dawn of new life & new light. Matthew invites us by combining a piece of ancient prophecy with something else that looked like an accident of geography; a reference to Zebulun & Naphtali.

When he mentions Zebulun & Naphtali he's basically referring to the "North Shore" of ancient Israel. Jerusalem was the "South Shore" and Galilee — where Jesus lived — was the "North Shore" of this tiny country (in case you're wondering, the Commonwealth of Mass. is about 25% bigger than Israel so the comparison works²). And in ancient Israel, no less than Mass., it was easy for people to have strong feelings about one or the other — especially if you grew up there. In Mass. *Boston Magazine* suggested that the, "rivalry [between North Shore & South Shore] is older than the nation itself—starting with the Pilgrims who landed in Plymouth and the Puritans who landed in Salem."³

Think of ancient Israel kind of like that. And one of the important things about the North Shore of ancient Israel was that they were vulnerable to attack. Whenever armies came marching through the ancient Mediterranean the North Shore suffered. Unlike the hill country in the South, the North was vulnerable; so much that Assyria conquered the North a full 150 years before Babylon finished the job by conquering the South.

The land of Zebulun & the land of Naphtali —the North — is where darkness always came first. But when Jesus arrives we're invited to behold a future that no one

² <http://mapfight.appspot.com/us.ma-vs-il/massachusetts-us-israel-size-comparison>

³ <http://www.bostonmagazine.com/north-shore-vs-south-shore/>

could predict. We're invited to see light dawning —first— in the darkest place. It's almost like Matthew is telling God's people: *We may know how to reconstruct our past. But when it comes to our God, we simply don't know how to predict our future.*

And that's always a good reminder for the Church. After all, when St. C's was founded in 1894, Christianity was already ancient history. Today we have more information than ever when it comes to reconstructing our past. Not just our past here at Linden Street; we have entire education departments & publishing industries dedicated to reconstructing the past of Christian faith & life around the world.

And even with all that information, when it comes to our God, we still don't know how to predict our future. Today there are plenty of people who think the Church in America already entered a fatal "spiral of decline." There are plenty of people grieving the Church in our generation like it's either the loss of a family member, or the nostalgic loss of a really old tree. Because despite all of Christianity's strength & resilience over the past, despite all of the tender loving care that people have invested in the God of our faith, when it comes to any single church: we still don't know how to predict our future.

And that's good news. Because our goal is never about "saving" or "preserving" any church. Our goal is always about following Jesus, and trusting that God will preserve us & keep us in whatever form serves God in our generation. So today in 1 Corinthians Paul tells one of the earliest churches that he's glad he can't reconstruct their past. He says, "thank God I only baptized a couple of you... and maybe a few others," (1Cor. 1.14-16). He can't really remember. Because whatever value we find in reconstructing our past, our

identity as Christians is always more about following Jesus. And Jesus has never been easy to predict. From the beginning, “the message of the cross [has been] foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are [following, who are] being saved it is the power of God,” (1Cor. 1.18).

What a great reminder for each of us, individually. Whenever we find our lives consumed by darkness, the good news is that we're following the same Jesus who invites us to find light dawning —first— in the darkest place. Where is the darkness in your life? Where is the sorrow, pain, or trouble. Keep following Jesus, and look for light in the darkest place. Following Jesus gives hope in our darkness — because we don't know how to predict our future. Its also gives humility in our success — because we just don't know what God is up to next.

Hope & humility. We couldn't ask for a better reminder as we gather after morning worship for our Annual business meeting; as we gather to celebrate our many gifts & opportunities, our ongoing responsibilities & concerns. We've seen a great swell of life in our little branch of God's Kingdom over these past 6 years. We have much to celebrate and many people to thank. Our future is full of anticipation. And also, as we look to the future let's always remember that as long as we're following Jesus: *We may know how to reconstruct our past. But we really don't know how to predict our future. Amen.*