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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

November 30, 2023

Feast of St. Andrew

[Deuteronomy 30:11-14](#)

[Psalm 19](#)

[Romans 10:8b-18](#)

[Matthew 4:18-22](#)

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One of the very first things I noticed when I came to Incarnation was the mighty oak tree in the courtyard, with its trunk that takes several people holding hands to reach around, and with its almost unbelievably long horizontal branch stretching out over the grass and pavement. Just a few months ago we finally had to bow to reality and install a pole to help support that branch; which was probably the right idea for all kinds of safety and liability reasons; but I felt a little wistful about it, because there was something magical about that gravity-defying branch, suspended in midair, anchored so sturdily, so powerfully, by that unseen network of roots.

A year or two ago a group from Incarnation participated in a course led by a local Native organization, the Redbud Resource Group. Our teacher Rose Hammock came to lead a session here at the church, and she told us that that branch might have been trained by the Pomo people of this place to allow for easier harvesting of acorns. She looked at that branch and she saw the work of the ancestors, those who had come before. The story of this place and this land goes deep.

What we don't see of our oak tree is the part below the soil. The roots of a coast live oak tree expand out in a vast circle that's often wider even than the span of the branches above. So when you're walking around our quadrangle tonight, imagine those roots below your feet; imagine how far they spread. And it's a good thing too, because that massive trunk, that massive branch, those green shoots bursting toward the sky—they can't exist unless they're deeply, powerfully anchored.

Tonight we celebrate our roots and our branches. Like our beloved oak tree, our story here at Incarnation is anchored deep in the past, and it's that anchor that grounds us as we stretch and grow up into our future.

Tonight we heard the story of Jesus' first call to Saint Andrew and the other disciples. "Follow me," he said, and something about that call was so compelling, so captivating, that they left everything and followed him. What a radical moment that was; what a new beginning. The beginning of what our presiding bishop Michael Curry calls the Jesus Movement; that group of people who were so drawn to Jesus that they couldn't help but follow him, learn from him, pattern their lives after him, discover new and abundant life in him.

That moment was a beginning; but of course it also wasn't a beginning, because that Jesus movement right there in that first moment was already deeply rooted and anchored in the ancient faith of Israel, the story of God freeing a people from slavery, giving them the Law and the Prophets, calling them to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with one living God, the creator and lover of all. Saint Paul in his letters, early on in that Jesus Movement, would describe the People of God as a tree and the Gentiles who were being drawn to God through Jesus as branches that were being grafted in.

This congregation is one piece of that great tree, a piece that took root here in this place one hundred and fifty years ago. And since then it's grown into a mighty network of branches and leaves, saints and sinners, beloved children of God in all their glory and all their flaws.

Our branches have included people like Robert Press Smith, the founding senior warden of this parish, a physician, a healer, a person of faith, and a person who had also served previously in the Confederate Army. Our branches have included people like Jonathan Avery Shepherd, the first rector to serve more than two or three years, a foundational figure here and a beloved pastor who had also been a dedicated secessionist and led prayers at the opening congress of the Confederacy. We can't ignore the ways our planting here was intertwined with stories of enslavement, and with stories of colonization and violence against Indigenous people.

Yet we can also tell stories of heroic and sacrificial service, like that of the itinerant missionaries who first served this place, led by James Lloyd Breck, known as the Apostle to the Wilderness, founder of multiple seminaries from Wisconsin to California and a lifelong friend of Native people; like that of the members of Incarnation who scrambled into action when the 1906 earthquake leveled most of downtown Santa Rosa, converting the then-rectory next door into a hospital for the injured while the dead were brought to lie in rest right here within these sacred walls.

And we can tell stories of everyday devotion, like that of Augusta Collett and Anna Finlaw, two women of Incarnation at the end of the 1800s whose extraordinary

talents as woodcarvers produced our altar, credence table, the intricately carved short pews in the front and back rows, and many more wooden treasures we still use Sunday by Sunday.

Our branches have kept growing. We might remember the musical and pastoral gifts of Arthur Farlander, a beloved pastor as well as a musician and scholar, honored with our St. Gregory window here in the chancel and as the namesake of the hall in which we'll gather later this evening to continue the celebration. We might remember the Guild of Incarnation, founded in 1874 by Henrietta Hahmann as a way for women to exercise their gifts of leadership in an era when clergy, vestry, and many other positions were reserved for men.

We might remember ministries that have flourished through the years, like a rich crop of acorns ripening on our branches: the Episcopal Tea Room at the Sonoma County Fair; the Living Room, born as a ministry of Incarnation, a day center for women and children experiencing homelessness, which grew and flourished and took root on its own and today remains one of Santa Rosa's most important organizations serving those needing shelter; our Incarnation 100 bike ride, which drew riders from across the state and beyond and galvanized practically the whole parish into a massive volunteer effort and celebration; our St. Andrew's Mission, which served as a beloved outpost for God's love and a beacon of inclusion of LGBTQ+ people on the Russian River. And we might remember some of those branches, those saints, that were among us as pillars of this congregation until very recently: branches like Lynn Cassil, like Russell Tye, like Frances Spater, like Marilyn Payne, like Rebecca Gbasha, and so many more.

We too are branches, those of us who name this congregation as our spiritual home, our spiritual family, our local piece here in this place, in this generation, of the Body of Christ that stretches across all places and all generations. We are continuing to bear a rich crop of new fruit, from our Imagine Incarnation process by which we are seeking God's vision for the future of our campus, to new ministry groups like our green team that seeks to align us more fully with God's creation or our Becoming Beloved Community team that seeks to find new ways to love and serve our neighbors. Tonight too we are welcoming two branches, a branch named Johnny T. and a branch named Bill, who have already been growing and thriving among us for some time, but who tonight are making it official as they reaffirm their baptismal covenant and are received into the Episcopal Church.

The life that courses through this tree, from the deepest root to the tiniest new bud, is the life of Jesus Christ, a life that surges into us in our baptism and that flows through us anew every time we celebrate the eucharist, every time we seek God in prayer or lift our voice in praise, every time we turn toward one another with a listening ear or an outstretched hand.

There are a lot of good oak trees. Ours is one of the best. But what I love about a good oak tree, more I think than any other kind of tree, is just how gnarly it is. Some trees grow straight and symmetrical. But our California live oaks have character. They're intricate. Branches curl and twist and double back on themselves. No two oaks are the same. They're complicated; they're unique; they're glorious. Like this place. Like each of you. Like each of us.

Tonight we give thanks for this great tree; yes, that tree, but especially for *this* tree, the tree that is Incarnation, one that's full of life, one that has room for each of our

own unique stories. Our first 150 years have given us a strong anchor. As we grow into the years ahead, we are stretching up and out toward the light; toward our future; toward God's call.