

WGUMC June 23, 2019 “Treeology”  
Genesis 1:9-13; Revelation 22:1-2

There are almost 800,000 words in our English Bible, so you might think that it would be easy to miss the trees for the forest of words in the Bible. But, in fact, there are trees everywhere. There are trees in the first chapter of the first book and in the last chapter of the last book. That’s strange considering that the biblical landscape was pretty desolate and not exactly thick with trees.

Goes to show you that whether we live in a desert or a rainforest, trees have always lived large in our religious imagination. This is true of people across the ages and throughout the world. From the Mayans to the Celts, from Norway to Nigeria, from the Hebrews in the Bible to the Ewoks on the forest moon of Endor, people have thought that trees have special powers, even divine powers. Ever since people climbed down from trees and walked on two feet, they have gathered in sacred groves to worship their gods in what John Muir would call “living temples.”

The practice of worshipping around special trees was so widespread in the ancient world that the Hebrew prophets felt compelled to rail against it. “My people consult a piece of wood,” Hosea complained. “They sacrifice...under oak, poplar, and terebinth, because their shade is good.” [Hosea 4:13] Isaiah also sounded the alarm: “Are you not children of transgression...you that burn with lust among the oaks, under every green tree....” [Isaiah 57:5] So strong was the connection between worship and trees that Moses had to lay down the law: “You shall not plant any tree as a sacred pole beside the altar that you make for the Lord your God,” it says in Deuteronomy. [16:21]

In light of how suspicious the prophets were about sacred trees, it’s surprising to learn how important they are in the Bible. In the Book of Genesis, God puts the Tree of Life at the center of the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Lord appears to Abram at the Oak of Moreh in Shechem. [12:6] And Abram builds an altar to God by the oaks of

Mamre, near Hebron. [13:18] Later, under those same sacred trees the angels of the Lord come to tell Abram, now Abraham, that he will be the father of a great nation. [18:1] And a few chapters later, in Beersheba, Abraham plants a tamarisk tree to mark the place where he calls upon the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. [21:33]

And on it goes. God keeps making history with trees, right up to the day that the Son of God saves the world on a tree at a place called Calvary. You have to wonder: is this just a coincidence? Why are there so many stories about God and trees?

I have to admit that if I had stayed on the high relatively treeless plains of Montana this question would probably have never come to me. But here I am in redwood country where the trees question me. I have a hunch that the reason the Bible is so full of trees is because trees have always had a way of connecting us to God. Like the words printed in your bulletin from the *Chinook Psalter*, trees have earth in their roots and heaven in their branches.

That makes trees a visible reminder of the invisible connection we have with God. They are powerful symbols of life pointing us to the Source of life.

We know from the Book of Genesis that trees are among the first living things that God creates. They are also the largest and longest living things on the planet. And they are important enough that they get singled out for honorable mention in the story of creation.

You may not have ever noticed this, but the Book of Genesis contains two different stories of the creation, one in the first chapter and another in the second chapter. We are more familiar with the first story, where it tells us that on the first day of creation, God makes the light. On the second day, God makes a dome over the earth and separates the waters above the dome from the waters below the dome. What the ancients called a “dome,” we would call the “atmosphere.” Now we have light, air and water—everything we need for life. Then, on the third day, we get dry land,

and from the soil come the plants and the first trees. It's a good thing that the trees were created on Day 3 so that they could start producing oxygen for Adam and Eve to come along on Day 6.

But we have a different order of creation in Chapter Two. In that telling of the story, Adam gets made first, formed from the dust of the ground. There being no trees, God breathes into his nostrils the breath of life so that Adam can become a living being. Afterwards, God creates the trees, and they can continue breathing into us the breath of life. That's a good reason to take care of the trees.

While these creation stories do not hold much historical truth, they do preserve some important environmental truths. However, what I am most interested in is rooting around in the Scriptures for spiritual truth. So, over the next few weeks, we're going to look at specific trees in the Bible in the hope that they will help us feel more connected to God. Each of the trees has a unique story to tell and important lessons to teach.

Next week we are going to talk about the trees in the Garden of Eden, but today, we are going to jump from the story of the first creation to a vision of the new creation, from the beginning of the Bible to the very end, because I was captivated by the tree of life in the Book of Revelation. In the final chapters, the author shares his vision of the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. In his very detailed dream, there is no temple in the city for God is the temple. There is no light, for God is the light. But there is a “river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing down from the throne of God and of the Lamb, through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month....”

I pondered this passage driving across the Central Valley this past week, through orchards that are heavy with fruit. But these trees only produce one kind of fruit and only during one season. By contrast, the fruit of the tree of life is never out of season.

I arrived in Modesto, and the memories started flowing. At every Annual Conference, we clergy see old friends and make new ones. We celebrate with pastors who are leaving their last church and pray for pastors who are being appointed to their first church. At the same time, we can't help but think back on all the seasons of our ministry. I bet you will do that, too, if you go to a family or class reunion or visit old friends or return to a favorite camping spot this summer. What the tree of life in Revelation tells us is that each season of life has its different fruit. That gives me hope, and let me tell you why.

If you are going through a difficult season in your life right now, one that seems fruitless, take it from the tree of life: God has put fruit on the tree just for you just for this season. God knows exactly what you need when you need it. If you are struggling through a season of poor health, the fruits that God wants to give you, wants to grow in you, are perseverance and patience. If you find yourself worrying about your job or anxious about your finances, the fruit on

the tree of life for you is trust. When your country is in chaos or your family is in crisis, the fruit ripening on the tree is calm courage. If you are weary with life or grieving someone's death, the fruit within your reach is God's healing peace.

We are all going through a season of life. Whether that season is good or bad, easy or hard, there is fruit on the tree of life for us, regardless. And as far as our spiritual growth is concerned, the tree of life in the Book of Revelation reminds us that it is always harvest time. So I want to encourage you to spend some time in the trees this summer. There are well-documented health reasons for doing this, which we'll talk about later, but there are documented spiritual reasons, too. The reasons are many, and they are recorded in our Scriptures.

This summer go sit under a tree, like Gautama Buddha who sat under a Bodhi tree, waiting for enlightenment. But, unlike him, you don't have to empty your mind. Instead, fill your mind with thoughts about the seasons of your life. Think about what you have done,



what you have learned, and what spiritual fruits God has produced in you during each of those seasons. You are in a different season now to be sure, and whether you are aware of it or not, there is new fruit ripening in you right this very moment. Don't try to pick it until it's ready. In God's time, the fruit will be so ripe it will take no effort at all. It will fall into your hand and plop into your heart, and its sweetness will be indescribable. Such is the fruit of the tree of life that God is growing in you. And all the trees of the field are clapping for you. [Isaiah 55:12]