

On the second week of Advent, we're beginning our series, where we will look at the theme of trees through the scripture. Now, just as a disclaimer, this is in no way going to be the origin of the Christmas tree. It is merely that the Christmas tree got us thinking about trees. And then, as we were exploring scripture to see how we wanted to present the story of Christmas and Advent, we realized how prominent this theme is. Outside of God and humans, trees are the next most named or commented on living thing in all of scripture.

I mean, they're all over the place. The odds are, if you were to flop your Bible open to any particular two pages, you would find a reference to trees. In Hebrew, it's the word 'êts, and it's a broader definition than when we think of the word tree. We tend to think of tall things that bear fruit or nuts. But in Hebrew, the word 'êts also represents the burning bush next to Moses, which in some ways is just a short little tree. That is really what bushes are. And so trees have this very prominent role.

In moments of importance throughout the story of scripture, you see the people of God going up onto high places and encountering God, generally next to trees. You see it in Genesis, and you'll see it in Revelation. You see it in Jesus, maybe in the absolute culmination of all the scriptures, hanging on a cross, which, of course, is made of a tree. And so this theme of trees, this design pattern, you'll see all through scripture.

What we're going to do for the next four weeks or so is trace this theme as simply a tool to tell the story of scripture, the very reason that we pause every year to celebrate Advent, which at its core means "coming." God is coming.

There are a few different Advents we think of. We think of both the Advent that happened on that first Christmas morning when Jesus arrived. We think of Advent, where at some point, as followers of Jesus, God comes to our hearts and our life. And then, of course, what we'll look at a bit today at the coming Advent in which the Kingdom of God is fully consummated on earth as it is in heaven. We see that in that second coming. We live in the tension of those three comings of Jesus.

So the story begins with trees, and it begins not just with trees, but it's actually this bustling garden. And remember, this is told from the posture of the Near East, which was a desert, a barren land. And so when God creates, he creates this bustling garden filled with vitality and life. And in that, he begins to create. This text comes out of this beautiful poem in Genesis 1, in which God is speaking the world into existence. And there's this cadence in which God speaks, and it comes to be. "There was evening, and there was morning, and it was good." And over and over, you see this cadence as God creates and it is good and what comes out of that creation is this beautiful garden.

When he creates humans, he creates them in the image of God. He takes them and puts them right in the middle of this garden. It begins with beauty. But what happens is from this moment to the end of scripture, we see this tree of life disappear for quite a bit of time. Because the story begins with a tree, but the story also ends with a tree. In Revelation 22 it says,

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Revelations 22:1-2

You see, the story begins with the tree, but the story ends with the same tree making its next appearance. We live in between these two trees. Life between these two trees is hard. It's difficult because what you find is that life between these two trees is humans wrestling with God, wrestling to be God, to seize control, to seize power. We see the fallout of sin and brokenness. We see shame and dehumanization. We see these questions arise. God, do you care? Where are you?

This is the season in which Advent takes place. It lives in the tension of these two trees. There's despair; there's frustration that becomes the shared language of all humanity. That's the human condition. And with all the joy, with all the shining lights, with all the happiness this season brings, for many of us, the inverse is also true. It brings hardship. It brings pain. It brings images of what could have been. What should have been. Life between the two trees is hard.

As I was working on this sermon earlier this week, my oldest daughter, Madison, who's our middle schooler, came out to me. She was just all of a sudden a wreck. She starts talking, and I don't know what spawned these thoughts in her mind, but through tears, she asked this question, "Why do we even celebrate Christmas at all?" She said that the world is so broken, and she goes on to cite racism, hunger, political tension, suicide, bullying, and wars. I got to thinking, you know, she's not wrong. How do we celebrate Advent in the midst of this? Why do we light candles? How can we open presents when the world seems to be falling apart around us?

And so I paused for a second, thinking of this Advent sermon that I was going to preach just a few days later, and I began to open up the very meaning and depth of Advent. See, most of us, like my daughter, view Christmas as a way of shielding ourselves from the real brokenness of the world. We view it as hiding behind the Christmas tree and the joy and the lights and the candles.

Advent is much different. Christmas time is about joy, but right now, before we get to that, we celebrate Advent. And Advent is about waiting. Advent is us rehearsing the story of God, where before Jesus' arrival, for 400 years, God was silent as the people of God suffered under the oppression of the Roman empire.

See, Advent is gritty. Advent has some skin in it. It's got some teeth to it. Advent is not about a blatant hiding behind the reality of the world. It actually is a season where we stare directly into the darkness, and what we find are little candle lights lit, little lights in which God is still working. God is still moving. Advent is about the story of God breaking into all of that. Advent is very much us tapping into that tension of the life between the two trees.

And we say the story doesn't end with us being left out of the garden. But rather, God is recreating not just a garden but a brand new city in Revelation 22, in which that Tree of Life reemerges and is presented to us.

You see, Advent is about that cry. "Come, Lord Jesus!" Like the song, *Oh Come, Oh Come Emmanuel*. "O come, o come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel. That mourns in lonely exile here until the son of God appears. Rejoice, rejoice. Emmanuel shall come to the o Israel. "

Advent is about crying out to God in the midst of that because you can't just celebrate the birth of God in human flesh by waking up on the 25th. You have to prepare for that. You have to prepare for that movement of God. And Advent is how we prepare for that. So the story begins with a tree, and the story ends with a tree because Advent is about the darkness between these two trees. It's about hope entering in and offering a new beginning.

Let's flip to Genesis 2. What we find is that the very story of God can hold all of that tension that young Madison was feeling and expressing earlier this week. See, the story of Advent has the ability to hold all of that together, to not close our eyes to it but look directly into it. And we'll see that beginning, the very origins of all of that pain, is here in Genesis 2. Again, this comes out of all this beautiful creation from chapter 1.

Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Genesis 2:8-9

So again, you see this image, this beautiful bustling garden, and in the middle, God places the humans, and he says it has all sorts of trees that are both pleasing to the eye and delicious to eat. It's this picture of perfection. And God places the humans in there because he desires them to have access to all that. The story begins in Genesis 1 and 2 with very good news. God's creation is good, and he repeats it over and over and over. The story begins with this goodness, and he places the human and says, "Here is where I want you to exist." Within that are two trees. There's the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

It probably goes without saying, but I'm going to say it anyway. The Tree of Life offers life. That is its whole purpose is it represents eternal life. That life of the age to come is there, present and available, right in the garden. It's the tree that we see later in chapter 3, where God says if they eat of it, they will live forever. And so it's there right in the middle. God places the humans there, and they have no qualifications of their own. Through no doing of their own, they have access to the very gift of an eternal life with God.

It has always been a gift. It has always been there for them. The story is not that if they obey, then they can take part in the Tree of Life. The story is the Tree of Life is available. It's always been God's posture to say, "Please partake in that life." But it's nothing that we do. It's just there and available.

But then we see this other tree. We see the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In Hebrew, the word evil may actually be better translated bad than evil. Because I think we bring some baggage to that idea of evil, although it's certainly a proper definition as well. But it's the Hebrew word *ra*. So there's this tree of *tob* and *ra*. It's good, and it's evil. And we will learn more about that tree in a second. Let's look down at verses 15 and 17. Between those verses, by the way, you just see God describing more of this garden with rivers flowing in every direction to all the corners of the earth.

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die." Gen. 2:15-17

So man is given two tasks. God places the human in the garden, and they are to work it and take care of it. Work was around even pre-fall. Pre-sin work is what it means to be human. We're meant to create; we're meant to build. We were meant to contribute and help and co-rule with God. This is really the theme of the story. God creates not because he's lonely but because he desires for us to experience that creation and co-rule a world with him—in his sovereignty. He actually gives authority away in some sense for us to help work and take care of the garden. And right after that, he tells them they can eat anything in this garden. Anything they want is available. But then he says that there is this one tree, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. He tells them that if they eat from that one tree, they will certainly die.

There are a few things to catch here. He doesn't say that if they eat from that tree, he will kill them, which I think is a common misconception about this story. We read that into the text. He is talking more in the vein of when I told my daughters when they were younger that they could play out front but not in the street. Because if they played in the street, it was going to be dangerous. God puts them in the middle of the garden. He tells them that from all of these trees, you can eat, but if you eat from this tree, he says, you will certainly die.

The Hebrew there is interesting, both the command to eat and the command to die. The way that the Hebrew functions, because they don't

have any punctuations, is they would duplicate the verb for an exclamation mark. And so God places the human in the garden. He says, "You can take from any tree, and you can eat, eat." That's the command—eat, eat. "But there's this one tree, and if you take from that one, you will die, die." The way we clarify that is certainly die or surely eat. It's an emphatic statement.

And there's this beautiful poetry because biblical writers are absolute literary geniuses. I don't mean that tongue-in-cheek. They are. They're framing these commands where he says, the first one is eat, eat. The second is you will die, die if you partake. And there's this framing in which the tree offers a choice because it's the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the knowledge of good and bad.

Through the scriptures, trees represent wisdom. You see this profoundly in Psalms 1 and 2, in which the wise one is like a tree planted by a river. The one who meditates on the very presence and word and teachings of God, and so when God places the humans in there, he's giving them a choice. In this scene that we unpack here, we could preach a year's worth of sermons. And I mean that quite literally because this encapsulates the very human condition that's before all of us. We are given the autonomy and the authority in any decision we have to choose the Tree of Life or the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Bad. Do we choose God's wisdom, or do we take the position of God and say, "I'm actually right here."

You'll see the serpent twist these words. Because the temptation is, do you trust that what God says is actually good for you? It's to maybe go back to that example of telling your child not to play in the street. They're thinking, "Yeah, but it looks like a whole lot of fun out there. Does dad really have my best interest in mind?" This is the tale of the two trees. It offers a choice for Adam and Eve. It offers a choice for us. What do we choose?

As we see later in the Proverbs and in Psalms, at the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. The beginning of wisdom is when we've come before the Lord knowing that God actually knows what's best, even when it looks enticing, even when it looks tasty, even when it looks like it's in our best interest to do what we desire, we trust that God has our best interest in mind.

So the tale of the two trees, where this begins, is a choice. Will we unite ourselves by quite literally eating of that Tree of Life, taking it within us to say, "I unite with the very wisdom and way of God?" Or do I reject that? Do I take from the knowledge of good and bad thinking? I am actually the one that can decipher right from wrong. The layers of this begin to unpack because this is the story you see before the biblical characters over and over. For every decision that we have, this choice is always before us. Will we step into the wisdom of God, or will we step into our own wisdom?

And what happens from this is that very tension my daughter felt. This is the seedbed of both life and death. It's available right there before them, and God looks at them and says: "Listen, you can eat anything. All of it is yours. Partake in the tree of life. I've built this world for you that you. That you can co-rule and commune with me. But if you eat from

that one, if you seize autonomy, if you take your own wisdom, if you think you know better than me, then that will certainly lead to death." He tells them not to take that tree. He tells them to trust him.

Well, most of us know where this story goes, but the very next story post-garden is Cain and Abel. It's two brothers who think they know what's best, that they seize the knowledge of good and bad, and the result of that is murder. The very first story post-garden—the tale of the two trees—is one that results in death because one did not partake in the Tree of Life. Rather he said, "I know what's best and what's best for me now is to actually kill my brother." It results in death, and that will then spiral.

If you read the first half of Genesis, you see sin spiraling out of control. It will swell up from the murderous rage of two brothers, which will result in a guy like Lamech. A guy who is raging and praising about how he kills over and over. This will then spiral and roll up into where we see the Tower of Babel, which is systemic sin in which all of humanity is saying we are like the gods. We can concur. You see, sin right here from this beginning is spiraling and spinning from the individual always to the systemic because that's what sin does. It always is both of those. It begins with the individual, but then those individuals feel they gain more wisdom, more power, and more autonomy, and that always rolls up more and more into building systems and worlds built on brokenness. And, of course, we see systemic sin. Of course, it integrates into that because we were meant to build a world based on the very wisdom of God. But when we seize control and say, "I'm going to build it on my own wisdom, my own understanding of right and wrong," of course, that bakes into the very structures of the world, and you see this devastating fallout of sin. We'll see this right here in Genesis 3:1-3.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" vv. 1-3

One note real quick that the word crafty in Hebrew is used in a positive light in other places in the Bible, such as Proverbs. We view it here obviously in a negative. And I think what the biblical authors are doing here is suggesting that with wisdom, with this craftiness, this almost strategic ability of autonomous thinker, there is both the ability to build up or to tear down. It's presenting another choice. Because when we get to Proverbs, they'll use that word, and it'll be a positive. In the Proverb, he plans and strategizes and thinks and can see out over the horizon. But yet here, the serpent is one who is crafty and yet he uses it to divide, destroy, and dehumanize. So again, this is a choice the authors are presenting.

We always have this choice. It echoes of Batman. With great power comes great responsibility. So God is baking into this that choice. She actually corrects the serpent and says, "No. You have it wrong. We're

actually allowed to eat anything we want except that one. Because God said if we interact with that one, we'll certainly die."

"You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:4-5). Do you see that? The serpent's response says that God doesn't know what he's talking about. The serpent says that they are not really going to die. And in some sense, he's actually not totally wrong. Because they don't instantly die, it wasn't necessarily a poisonous apple. It wasn't that they ingested it and seconds later fell over dead. But rather, that death was introduced and would be seen further down the road.

So he's wrong, and he's twisting the truth. He's taking a small bit, and he's tweaking it. He basically says that God's nervous about it because he's just envious. He doesn't have your best interest in mind. That what God really wants to avoid is them becoming like him in the ability to say what's right and wrong. Because what's actually true is that when they partake in the fruit, they do begin to make those decisions on what's right and wrong. In that sense, they do actually become like God, but not in the way that we may think of it. Rather they're taking on the very mantle of God, the position of God, and saying, "I will determine what's right and wrong, not God."

But again, as we learn over and over the fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom since that's where true life is found. Do you believe God has your best interest in mind? And I know the answer is yes. I know that's what we're supposed to say on a Sunday morning here in church, but do you really believe God knows what's best for you? I would guess, if we were honest, we are a bit fickle on that. We know it in our mind, but has it integrated itself into our bodies where we actually maneuver in out of the trust that God knows what's right.

Because Church, here's the problem. If God agrees with everything that we say, if God seems to just line up with every belief and thought and action we have, I wonder if we've created God in our own image. I wonder if we, like Adam and Eve, took from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil but then we've layered it on with, "No, God would agree." If God hasn't confronted some of your sensibilities, where you feel that tension of living the life between the two trees, I wonder how intimately aware of God's leading we are? Because what we see over and over, every character in the scriptures wrestled with this, people think they know what God would say, but they're presented with this counter-story, "Gosh, maybe I don't know as well as I thought." Because that's the human condition. God is working out of that.

What we see here in Genesis 3 is as they partake of this, they'll be exiled out of the garden because God knows that their hearts are fickle. We need someone who can renovate us from the inside out to where our desires are purely in line with God's. We need someone who can animate that because we can't do that on our own. We need the Holy Spirit to come and dwell within us so that he can shape our hearts more in the direction of God. See, we always have this opportunity before us between these two trees, but so often, we think we can make the decision

on our own. Yet we desire, we need desperately for the Holy Spirit to help us make the right choice, to help us walk in the way of the Lord.

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. vv. 6-7

The very first fallout of sin. Remember what God had brought together when he created Adam and Eve was the two became one. And the very first thing that happens when they take from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is they recognize their differences, which they had never recognized before. And it quite literally tore that union apart. When they look at each other, they see that they're naked and different, and it fractured. It pulled them apart to where they began to notice those differences in ways that just brought more and more shame, which is why they took the fig leaves to try to cover up. Because this is more than just physical nakedness, they recognized in their nakedness is a vulnerability. They then begin to shrivel in shame. They quite literally become less than.

Because to be human is to live within limitations, this is the story. You can eat everything but not that tree. And so to be truly human, to be truly creaturely, is not to transcend limitations no matter what our world and this particular patch of land in the world would say. They have this drive to transcend limitations, some of that has been very good for the world, but just as with great power comes great responsibility, much bad comes from that as well. To be truly human is to actually live within limitations and to know that we can't make the decision of right and wrong all on our own. It isn't about just what we feel that's right. But rather, the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, which says that God has a say about this. And to live within that limitation is how we find life.

What Adam and Eve did when they took of that tree is their union; that perfect creation was fractured because they wanted to transcend limitations. They wanted to be like God. Since the first effect is the dehumanization of Adam and Eve, it makes them less than human because they weren't living in the way in which they were created. It made them something different, which was their ambition. They wanted to be like God. Of course, we want to be like God. And so we see this,

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. vv. 7-8

The very things that God gave them for their flourishing, *"Eat anything you want."* *They're hiding behind from the very creator of that garden. "But the Lord God called to the man, 'Where are you?'"* (v. 9). Where are you? Is this a comment where he literally didn't know where they were, or

is this directly from the heart of God? "Where are you? This is not how I created you to be. You are meant to enjoy this creation, and you're hiding in shame behind it."

Where are you, Church? Advent is about hearing that question again from God. Where am I? Advent is about the recognition that we, too, have taken of the tree of *tob* and *ra*. We've taken the position of God and said, "I can make the right choice between right and wrong, not you, God." And it's God's response. Where are you? Where? And as I said earlier, sin's effects will spiral further into this systemic thing. It will spiral between more seizing autonomy, seizing power, taking on our position of God, and not listening to the very goodness and the gift of eternal life that God gave right from the beginning. It will result in all the fallout that we see in the world this week and this year. Your life. The pain, the ache, it's all there. We see the darkness.

But the story begins with a tree, and the story ends with a tree. Advent is about remembering that the Tree of Life will make another appearance. This isn't the end of the story, but life between the two trees is hard. There's a lot of tension and brokenness. Advent stares right at it and has the gull to cry out, "Oh come, oh come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel." That's the story of Advent. What you see if you read closely in these two chapters is two things about God where he will not let this be the end of the story.

The first is that God is merciful, and it may not look like mercy at first, but look at Genesis 3. This is after he levies out all the curses and the pain and the fallout of disobeying God, of taking it on our own ability; in verse 22, it says, "*And the Lord God said, 'The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever'*" (v. 22). This is a severe mercy. God recognizes if humans are in a condition in which they believe they can decide right and wrong it will not be good.

God can see out over the horizon. He sees Cain and Abel. He sees Lamech. He sees the Tower of Babel; he sees the war in Ukraine. He sees systemic racism. He sees all of the brokenness that will fall from Genesis to now. And what he says is, if humans can live forever, that's a hell that we could never imagine. And he says we can't allow them to take, in their condition as they are, from that tree and live forever. Because as bad and as wrong as some of the most evil that's been perpetuated in this world, there's a mercy that it ends at the end of a life and doesn't continue on.

The great spoiler is that Easter's coming. The other high point in which death also doesn't get is the last word. And so when God casts them out in exiles out of the garden, it's a merciful act that says, "We cannot allow this to go on forever, but I'm working in it. I'm bringing about Christmas morning. I'm bringing about something new in the midst of all of this brokenness. God here is merciful in the midst of it.

The second thing we learn is hidden in verse 15. It's that God is working. If anyone asks when did Advent begin, it's Genesis 3:15. This is where he's laying down the punishment to the serpent. "*And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.*" Now, the word offspring is the word seed. In Hebrew, it's literally seed. It's what you would plant a tree with. Verse 3:15 is the first time we see explicit hints of Jesus. He says there's coming from the very seed of Eve, someone who will come and will crush that serpent. The deceitful one that lured the humans away. Someone is coming, and, yes, it will be crushed by the heel, but the serpent will strike at it. And that exchange is quite literally what we see in our communion elements.

We see the beginning, the hints of Advent right here in Genesis 3:15 that says there's coming one who will fix this whole thing, and it will look different. The serpent will strike. Death will have its say on Jesus, but it will not have the last word. Because again, the story begins with the tree, but it ends with a tree. And when it ends with a tree, it's Jesus having made manifest the resurrection of all things. The reconciliation of all things. What we find again is access to the Tree of Life. But it's different because we have been made new. Our hearts have been restored and renovated.

This is the story of Advent, and my hope as we go through this series, as you prepare for the celebration of something as profound as the very incarnation of God, is that we would live in that tension. But we'd hold to Genesis 3:15 that God is merciful, that he's working, and that there's another tree that's coming. It will be restored, but for now, we sit in Advent. We're not at Christmas Joy yet. That's coming in a few weeks, but right now, we're in the tension of Advent.

The very death of Jesus, what the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil brought forth into the world, is in some ways the very tool that Jesus will use to bring about the Tree of Life again. It's a mystery of how from death comes life, and from brokenness comes beauty. From Jesus, who takes our sin, who takes on all that happens here in Genesis 3 because we can't take it on our own, will bring about that new life.

Notice what happens right there in the beginning; you see Adam and Eve fail to do God's will. And when they do, they hide behind a tree naked and covered in shame. But in the elements of the Eucharist, we see a similar garden, the garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus is before God, and he says, "Not my will, but yours be done." And in that garden, Jesus is faithful. Unlike Adam and Eve, unlike us, Jesus is faithful. He, too, is stripped naked, and he, too, is on a tree. And on that tree, he's not covered in shame. He actually takes our shame upon himself. This is the story of Advent that we participate in.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2022 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1473-FC