

Season of Creation: Forest Sunday

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Rev. Jason Glombicki

September 17, 2017

Although it may not feel like it today, summer is coming to an end. I hope you've had time the past few months to enjoy God's gifts in nature. Today, we are invited to give thanks for God's creation. One of the more important ecological images in the bible is a tree. Of course, we hear about trees in other places as well. Trees play an important role in Norse legends, Mayan images, the art of the woodlands Indians, and even in the logo of Disney's Animal Kingdom. We also enjoy the presence of trees. Even during the cold, dark days of winter we drag trees into our homes, and then we spend time in their natural habitat when they finally bloom in spring. So too, in the reading from Genesis we also found a person among the trees.

In the beginning of that second creation story, we heard that God planted a lush garden with rivers and trees. Into this garden, God breathed to life an "earth creature." The word for "earth creature" in the original Hebrew is *adam*, which is where we get the English word Adam. Now, this earth creature was asked to care for the garden. But the narrative quickly directs our attention to one particular tree - a tree that helps us understand life.

The well-known liturgical scholar, Gail Ramshaw, reminds us that the point of the full narrative is not to explain why we have evil, or to historically communicate who is responsible for sin, or to describe "the fall of humankind." Rather, this tree reminds us that we, as a people, are discontent, unhappy, and fractured. That one tree reveals that humanity is characterized by neediness, ego, laborious work, deceit, and finally death.¹

We know this tree all too well. We feel the splinters of a relationship cutting us and infecting our soul. We take axes to trees hoping their trunks and land might produce profit. We stand under the tree's canopy, swindling God's children with our lies and ignorance. But, we forget those actions as we idly watch our tax dollars pay for bodies hanging from a lynching tree and trying keep humans behind steel bars instead of among the soaring trees. With our idleness, we point fingers at past generations. We blame politicians for regulations that are too strict or too loose. We look away

¹ Ramshaw, Gail. *Treasures Old and New*. "Tree." Pages 396-400.

when only 20% of original forests are intact due to deforestation. Then, we mourn the destruction of trees thanks to wildfires, hurricanes, and disease-carrying insects. But when do we pause and listen to the trees? When do we hear their struggle to adapt with climate change? When do we heed their warning that their death is our death? Oh, yes, God is right, the tree will indeed be our death.

This tree of death, however, is not the only word. As we moved to the scriptures' final chapter we saw a vision. In John's revelation, we glimpsed another tree. This tree is one of life. Here we're invited into a developing reality of a tree with abundant fruit for every nation. It's a tree whose leaves bring healing for you, for me, and for all people. It's a world that honors each tree. It's a world where the birds and bees appreciate the protection of leaves from disease and infection. It's a vision where you and I say "thank you" to a willow tree each time we swallow an aspirin. It's a place where we honor the trees who supply minerals and oxygen into the air and the ocean. You see, this wondrous place in Revelation is one where the trees, like God, breathe life into us mortal earth creatures.

But, the thing is, today is not "tree Sunday;" today is "forest Sunday." So, we move beyond trunks and include ferns, forbs, foxes, and fruits. We see Christ alive in moss, maple, and moose. We see God in all living things. To be clear, I'm not arguing for pantheism, which is the belief that all that is alive is divine and that there is no God beyond what is living. Instead, I believe the Bible teaches *panentheism*, that is that God is manifest in all living things. God is manifest in the nutrients we gain from photosynthesis. God is present in the leaves that slow rain's fall to reduce flooding. God is found in you and in me.

Jesus reminded us in the gospel that "every good tree bears good fruit." The fruit we bear is because God is manifest in us. We become the hands and feet of God. We are co-creators with God to bring about Revelation's vision of "the tree of life." You and I are empowered, encouraged, and enflamed to give thanks for the forests.

And so, through the simple actions of "reduce, reuse, and recycle," we tip our hat to God in the trees. When we advocate for responsible environmental policy, we help God create abundant life for all. When this congregation began exploring an ecologically-responsible heating and cooling system, we chose to help nourish the tree of life.

So too, when we return here each week, we gather around a life-giving tree. This wooden table and this wooden cross remind us of our life-giving God. In the sacraments, we proclaim

God's presence. Together we become a community of action, a place of love, and a harbor of hope. After all, a single pine, poppy, or porcupine is not a forest, but together they are an interconnected life-giving ecosystem. So too, we are stronger when we are together. At that font and at this table we come together as one. Then, we are sent together, partnered with our God, to cultivate the tree of life. Amen.²

² This sermon uses resources from both: 1) Ramshaw, Gail. *Treasures Old and New*. "Tree." Pages 396-400. and 2) <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B-IQ-kQjLF-WTVVYQVFZZEhacVk/view>