

This is our last week in this mini sermon series titled, ‘Rooted and Growing.’ It’s a series in connection with our new logo, but also a theme that I’m hoping to carry through the year. Next week we’ll take a bit of a break, and then the following week starts the season of Lent.

But over the last six weeks, we’ve been engaging with tree-like imagery in Scripture—of being rooted, planted, bearing fruit—and how that impacts our spiritual formation in Christ.

We’ve also looked at how Christ uses this kind of imagery or symbolism for Himself—as the Root, the Branch, the Vine.

And today we’re looking at one final image—and one that can’t necessarily be contained to just speaking about us or Christ, but rather is indicative of our union together.

Read Revelation 22:1-5.

Now, before we engage more with this passage in Revelation, I want to draw your attention back to Genesis, the beginning of this whole story of God’s engagement with His people. Because this isn’t the first time that the tree of life has shown up.

*Genesis 2: “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.”*

A lot of times when we speak about Genesis, most people instinctively think that there’s only one tree mentioned in Genesis—the one that Adam and Eve took the fruit from.

But there’s actually two trees. And they both have an important role to play in humanity’s relationship with God.

Because these two trees present humans with an opportunity. One allows them to live forever (3:22), and the other brings about an awareness of evil. Really, it brings about an awareness of good and evil, whereas formerly only good was known. It is to know *of* evil.

Now, living forever—or choosing the tree of life—seems great *provided that* we don’t have the presence of evil among us, correct? If we’re going to live eternally with God and with one another, I don’t think evil should be there.

But God always gave them (us) the choice. Basically He said to them: you can be with me where goodness is, where I am, without evil, or you can choose to *know* what evil is. Your eyes can be opened to know good *and* evil. To put yourselves in the position of deciding between good and evil.

But to choose that meant that they were choosing independence from what God desired for them to know. It was choosing independence *from* God as the judge.

So it's a bit of a power grab. Knowledge is power. We know that.

But the stinging reality in this situation is that the knowledge of good and evil doesn't actually bring *humanity* power—it gives evil its power. And we've been reeling from that choice ever since.

This past week, I read an article written by Nicole Baart. She wrote out an interview that she had with a family friend who had been unlawfully detained by ICE officers in Minneapolis simply because of the colour of his skin.

In the conversation, she hears that this family friend—Joseph—had been out picking up some food on his lunch break when he saw four black SUVs and guys in military wear in the parking lot.

They started asking him some questions, but as soon as others noticed the situation and started to record what was happening, the ICE officers cuffed him and quickly put him in the back of an SUV.

Joseph says in the interview: "I started to explain to them my situation, my status, but as you know, the sad reality is most of them don't know anything about immigration." In other words, they're choosing to be their own judges. They're choosing what they know and what they don't know.

What followed was 30 hours of Joseph trying to not get deported, simply because these men had never seen an I-20 form before and didn't understand the complexities of immigration policy.

Joseph said this, "I wish people knew that they are not doing things the right way. There's a big disconnect between what they say they're doing and what they are actually doing."

Even the officers who *knew* that Joseph wasn't supposed to be there did nothing to get him out.

It reveals how this kind of situation, this kind of injustice—so much of our human folly—is a result of humans having chosen to know good and evil. To be the masters of our own universe. To be our own judges of good and evil. Even when we should 'know' better.

Paul talks about this in Romans 7. If you don't know what evil is, you can't commit it. But once you know what it is, it's impossible to avoid it.

"I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.... For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. [Even the best of us in the best of times are plagued by this.] For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing."

Now, knowing that this is our reality—and that situations like what Nicole describes are the result—do we really wish that we could have had access to the tree of life in this state? Do we want to live eternally *in this state*?

No. In His mercy, God blocked the way to the tree of life because He didn't want us to experience this horror of living independently of Him forever. Of living in the awareness and knowledge of evil forever.

He *had* to ban Adam and Eve from the garden because—as author and preacher Darrell Johnson put it—it wasn't just knowledge that they had eaten, as if God is afraid of us having knowledge.

It was the tree of the knowledge *of good and evil*. And they didn't just choose one or the other. It was to know *both*. They chose to know the difference.

And that's the kind of knowledge that invites us to be independent of God because *we* can now be the judges of what is good and what is evil. We know the difference; we can decide.

Which—as we know—is a scary reality.

And so the rest of Scripture, then, is about God gradually bringing that opportunity back—the opportunity to choose the other tree—the tree of life. To choose God. To choose life *in* God.

It starts small. We only see echoes of it in the Old Testament. But the opportunity is there.

After God gives the Israelites the law, He concludes by saying that He has now set before them life and death. *Choose life*, He says. (Deut. 30?)

In the Psalms, there is the blessing of *life* forevermore (133:3). In Proverbs, those who find wisdom gain understanding because she is like a *tree of life* (3:13, 18). Again in Proverbs, the fruit of the righteous is a *tree of life* (11:30).

And even more overtly, in the prophecy of Daniel, it says that many who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting *life* (12:2).

Those are just a few examples, but the whole way along we are given evidence, subtle echoes, that this original opportunity of the 'tree of life', this opportunity for life forevermore—for life beyond death, for a life that is *separate from* the life where evil is known and practiced—that this kind of life *is yet a possibility*.

But it is only when *these* words are spoken that the opportunity truly becomes real.

Jesus says: *“I came so that they may have life, and have it to the full,”* (Jn. 10). Not just life, but life *to the full*.

That word for ‘full’ in the Greek implies a kind of superabundance. An excessive amount. A superfluous amount.

What else could that mean other than life beyond life? Life without end? What else could this mean but that life in all its fullness is once again on the table as an option? That it is once again an opportunity, a chance, a choice?

From the moment that Jesus steps onto the scene, this concept of entering eternal life—a life *with* God—blows up. It’s everywhere. It’s all over the gospels, but especially in the gospel of John.

John 3:16 - *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

John 5:24 - *‘Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life...’*

John 6:58 – *Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.’*

John 10:28 - *I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.’*

John 17:3 - *Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*

This is the good news that Jesus passed on to His disciples. That what was just a shadow of hope in the Old Covenant is now an actual reality in Jesus. This is the hope that He gave them, and that His Spirit inspired them to believe and trust and provide witness for.

That in Jesus they could choose to *know* God. Because the knowledge of evil would be stripped of its power. And the consequence of evil—that being death—would be done away with.

Which is why, right at the end of Scripture—literally in the last chapter, as if to bookend this whole story—the opportunity that was there at the beginning in Genesis is now also at the end in Revelation.

Something that the Alpha and Omega Himself has put back in place.

Verses 1-2: *“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.”*

In the *new* creation order, there is only one tree. There is no option for the other tree because the other tree has been done away with. Evil is no more.

Now only the tree of life, sustained by the water of life—an image, likely, of the Holy Spirit who flows from the Father and the Son—only the tree of life is bearing fruit. And its fruit that is for all people, in all times, and for the purpose of healing.

Healing from the pain and agony, from the impact of having chosen the wrong tree. Healing from the lack of goodness that the world has known.

And what's even more mind-boggling is that what we see the tree of life doing here in Revelation is what *we too*—who *also* are nourished by and sustained by the Spirit—have been tasked with doing.

The work of the tree—in bearing fruit in all seasons and for all people eternally—is the same work that you and I today have been invited to join in.

Yes, the Church—we who are grafted into the Vine that is Jesus, through the Spirit—we help to bring the healing power of Jesus *to the nations*. This was God's chosen solution to the problem. To give us the opportunity for life, and to make that opportunity known to others *through* us.

Because the 'knowledge' of good—the knowledge of God—overcomes the knowledge of evil for those in whom the Spirit of Jesus dwells. It's why Paul said in Romans 12, "*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*"

Why? Because you *can*. In the Spirit, now you *can* be overcome by good. You *can* overcome evil with good.

And so what we are practicing here—as the Body of Jesus, as the branches that find their nourishment in Him—what we practice here today is what we *will do* in eternity. What we hope for in eternity is what we seek to practice here.

And this passage in Revelation is an encouragement to us that even though we will never be the perfect Body of Jesus bearing the perfect fruit, our task is yet to bear the healing, Holy Spirit-fed fruit of the Kingdom of God.

See, all this language in Scripture of being rooted and growing like a tree and bearing good fruit—it all culminates in this moment. It all leads to this. With Christ on the throne, the waters of the Spirit flooding everything, and the Church of all nations bearing fruit to the glory of God.

When we no longer live independently of God but are instead completely fulfilled by Him.

And when I have *that* future in mind, that ultimate end that my current sanctification journey is working me towards, then I can look at situations like what Joshua experienced in Minneapolis with a different lens.

Because admittedly, on a personal note, I felt very angry when I read the interview. The ways that these officers are treating refugees, immigrants, and even American citizens as if they're criminals. The lack of respect and dignity. The horrid conditions that these people are being forced to endure.

All because they look like they don't belong. They're being dehumanized. Their stories don't matter. I have fears that I've never known or felt before; I'm not used to this.

But ultimately the anger I feel is just a response to the reality that human beings keep picking the wrong tree. It's like a perpetual habit or addiction that we can't get away from—this incessant need to choose to be our own judges of right and wrong, to choose to decide apart from God, to grasp for a kind of power for ourselves that actually only furthers the power of evil.

We keep choosing independence over life. Thinking that we know better. Creating our own truth rather than sitting under the truth of the Creator.

And so over the last number of days, I've felt compelled to hold my anger within the context of Jesus, who came so that we may have fullness of life, and who showed His disciples how to start living into that fullness.

How? By asking them to walk a second mile when their oppressors told them to walk for one. By eating with tax collectors and sinners—the kind of people that society despised.

By loving their enemies and praying for those who persecuted. Why? Because we're just as broken as they are. Because they too have stories that we are unaware of. Because they genuinely do not *know* what they are doing.

And, even more importantly, because the fruit we bear is meant to mirror—to be a hope-filled reflection—of the fruit that we will bear in and for eternity. A fruit that is filled with the glory of God. A fruit that demonstrates good without the stain of evil.

There's one last image I want to share with you, and I'll finish with this. There's a church in Norway called Bergen Cathedral that has been around for almost 900 years. It was built in 1150.

And imbedded into the side of one of its walls is a cannonball from the Battle of Vagen in 1665. It was a battle between English and Dutch fleets, which took place on the sea, but a lot of cannon balls were shot at the city. And this cannonball has been maintained as a historical reminder of the conflict.

And when I saw that, I thought, “That’s kind of like the impact that that knowledge of evil has on us. It’s like a cannonball that has left its imprint on us as a reminder of the original conflict that happened in the garden.”

It’s left its mark on us. It’s an impact. A wound.

And yet our hope is that the wound of sin—the historical trauma that we carry, and the way we see that trauma playing out in the world—our hope in Christ is that this imprint will be healed. Fully and completely healed.

Because the tree of life, rooted in the lifegiving Spirit of Jesus, who is the Alpha and the Omega, is for the healing of the nations. Not just one nation. Every nation. (Painting.)

It all ends with healing. Full healing. Which is where we must focus ourselves as well. Because our role as the branches of the Vine, the arms and extensions of Jesus, His hands and feet, is to participate in that healing. That is why we are here. It is why He organized us as His church. It’s why we gather together.

To be reminded that although evil has left its mark, He still chooses us to be the conduits of His grace to a world, to a city, to a neighbour, to friend—or enemy—who is in need of healing.

May *His* grace be the channel to that healing.