

CHRIST THE BRANCH AND OUR CALL TO BEAR FRUIT

(4) THE TREE OF LIFE

Genesis 3:20-24

Matthew 25:31-40

Revelation 2:7; 22:1-5

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July 9, 2017

SCRIPTURE

²⁰The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living.

²¹And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them. ²²Then the LORD God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”—

²³therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life (Genesis 3:20-24 NRSV).

³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’

³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?’

³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,[£] you did it to me’ (Matthew 25:31-40 NRSV).

⁷Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the

tree of life that is in the paradise of God.

¹Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through 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; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; ⁴they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever (Revelation 2:7; 22:1-5 NRSV).

MESSAGE

We have been engaged in a series on Christ the Branch and Our Call to Bear Fruit. Each message features a key verse related to Christ, our Branch, and then applies that verse to how we should grow in our own faith as plantings of the Lord.

The key verse for today is from the Revelation to John:

“To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God” (Rev 2:7).

Over the past weeks, we have heard about a Branch, a Vine, and four trees. The first tree is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It was the tree that God placed in the center of the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were to obey God's command concerning that tree: "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." Adam and Eve had everything they could possibly need or want, but the one thing denied them was the thing they wanted – and the thing they took for themselves.

This sin was not simply disobedience but the desire to be like God, that is, to choose for themselves what is true, what is good, and what is beautiful. In a sense, the snake did not deceive them as much as he exploited a self-deception that had sprung up within them.

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate (Gen 3:6 NRSV).

In other words, they believed they could do just as good a job (if not a better job) as God

in determining what is true, what is good, and what is beautiful. But they could not. Consequently, truth became stained with lies, goodness corrupted with evil, and beauty with hatred. "Take and eat," says the Evil One, "And you won't need God." But it is a lie. And when we fall for the lie we fall from our relationships. Our relationship with nature – cursed. Our relationship to one another – cursed. Our relationship to God – cursed. And this self-deception continues to plague humanity to this day.

We share in the rebellion of our first parents, daily adding our own disobedience and rebellion against God. We, too, share in the suffering and the sentence of death: "For you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

But God our Creator loved all that he had made. He loved the people he had created. Death would not have the final word. Already in Eden God announced a promise of hope. A descendant of the woman would come to destroy the power of the tempting serpent. Down through the ages, God spoke again and again through his prophets – always pointing to the Child of the woman, the Son of a virgin, who would come to destroy the ancient serpent and set things right again. God would raise up a righteous Branch from the family tree of Israel's King David – the second tree in our series. A living shoot would spring up from the ruined stump of Judah's royal line. The righteous Branch would bring justice and righteousness. He would save his people and they would dwell securely in his kingdom. The dust of death would not claim them forever. Life, not death, would have the last word.

The third of the four trees is the tree of the cross. When the time was right, God sent his Son into the world. He is our Savior Jesus Christ, the Child of the woman, the righteous Branch of the royal house of David. Rejected by the people he came to save, the righteous Branch was cut down. Jesus was nailed to the tree of the cross. There the innocent Son of God hung in humility and shame, carrying the sins of the world – from the sin of Adam and Eve to our own sin to the sin of all those yet to come – in his body on the tree. There on the tree of the cross, Jesus, the righteous Branch of David, took the curse of Adam and Eve's disobedience, the curse of our disobedience, onto himself. In the words of the apostle Paul: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.'" His saving work accomplished, Jesus' body was taken down from the tree and buried in a borrowed tomb. But on the third day, the righteous Branch sprang to life! The crucified Savior is our risen and living Vine. By faith we are united to him and nourished by his Word and Sacrament. In him, as branches grafted to the Vine, we bear the fruit of love and service to the glory of God.

There is one more tree – the tree of life. We last saw that precious tree in Eden, forbidden

to Adam and Eve so they would not eat of it and live forever in their fallen, sinful state. Mighty angels and a flaming sword were set in place to guard the way to that forbidden tree. As the descendants of Adam and Eve multiplied on the earth, sin multiplied with them. In righteous judgment, God destroyed all flesh with a flood, saving Noah, his family and pairs of animals. After the flood, God promised never again to send a flood to destroy all flesh. "While the earth remains," God said, "seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."

But another day is coming, the day when Jesus, the righteous Branch, the crucified and risen King, returns in glory to judge the earth. On that day he will summon all nations to stand before him. Those who rejected Jesus as King will have given evidence of their faithless lives through their lack of love and service. Those who in faith acknowledge Jesus as King will have displayed evidence of their faith – much to their surprise – in acts of love and service to others, service that was offered to the King. They will hear the invitation of their King: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

God our Creator will create a new heaven and a new earth, restoring what was lost in Eden. We do not know what that new creation will be like, although it will be, Holy Scripture promises us, a place "in which righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:13). The book of Revelation provides us with images of this wonderful home of righteousness. As a river flowed out of Eden, in this paradise of God a river flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb. And by that river of the water of life stands the tree of life, with its twelve kinds of fruit and its leaves "for the healing of the nations." It is a tree of life and healing that brings to mind the righteous person of Psalm 1, who is like "a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season." It is a tree of life and healing that brings to mind the Righteous One, our Lord Jesus, the righteous Branch of the house of David. He is the Righteous Branch who, through the tree of the cross, has become for us a tree of life. It is a tree of life that is no longer guarded and forbidden. Jesus says:

To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God (7b).

Jesus our King invites us to partake of the eternal life he won for us by his death and resurrection: "To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life." Jesus has conquered, and by faith, his victory is our victory. We are, Scripture tells us, "more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Romans 8:37). Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, forgiveness and eternal life are ours because Jesus won them for us.

Another key term here is “paradise.” Jesus told the penitent thief who was crucified with him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43 NIV). The word “paradise” is borrowed from the Persian language and refers to a walled garden where friends of the King would be invited to walk with him.

The idea here is that if we turn back to Christ, he welcomes us as his friends. We get to walk with him in his “pleasure garden.” And not only that, we get to invite others to be his friends also. Together we can share in his victory and live in his love.

Then one day you and I will hear our King's invitation to celebrate forever his healing forgiveness and the joy of eternal life in his presence: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."