

“Logging the Tree of Life”
Genesis 2:4b-22 and Revelation 22:1-7
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Last Sunday, I mentioned that despite some very educated guesses, no one really knows the exact location of the famous Mt. Horeb where Moses saw the burning bush and received the Ten Commandments. The same, it seems, is true of the equally famous Tree of Life, about which we just heard in Genesis. If someone had found it, they would have had to get past its defenses, namely the cherubim, and I don't mean the cute little baby angels, and a sword not only flaming, but turning, both designed to keep you, or I, or any other pesky human being from approaching the Tree of Life until the time is right. I am confident its location is still a secret because if someone had found it, we would have heard about it by now, not for the beauty of the tree itself, even though a famous poet once said, “I think that I shall ever see a poem lovely as a tree,” but because the cherubim and flaming swords would be hard to keep under wraps.

The guarding of the Tree of Life, and the reason given for it, seem to suggest that despite our belief that before the fall, Adam and Eve were designed and destined to live eternally, in fact they weren't. At the end of chapter three, as the reason given for the expulsion of the first couple, we are told clearly that God fears that Adam “might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever,” and thus orders the tree off-limits. It is quite curious that despite

the attention given to this particular tree, we are not really told the whole story about it. It is the tree of “life” although it gives life to no one in the garden, certainly not from eating it, and probably not from looking upon it. You will recall that God caused the trees of Eden to grow so that they were “pleasant to the sight and good for food,” and we have no reason to believe the Tree of Life was not also a tree of beauty, but its appearance doesn’t seem connected with the sustenance of life. And so, its life giving properties remain obscure until some future date, that time we heard about in Revelation. It remains curious too, that the Tree of Life was not on the “do not eat list” which Adam and Eve were given. And thus it remains one of those wonderful mysteries of the Bible.

The Tree of Life has, of course, been linked symbolically with the cross, an interpretation based on the life-giving act of Jesus, both in giving his human life, and securing our eternal lives. Jesus was, as we are told, “hung on a tree” to die so that we might live, and it is by taking hold of Christ that we take hold of eternal life, much like Adam might have reached out and taken also from the tree of life, and eaten, and lived forever. What’s more, the tree’s description in Revelation, with its good and abundant fruit and leaves that heal the nations, echoes Christ’s ministry to both Jew and Gentile alike. The tree, in Revelation, is located in a city, rather than in a garden, and so some commentators have suggested that in Christ’s act of sacrifice, God has moved, or will move the tree to a place where it will be accessible by everyone, just as Christ is. In Revelation, there is no protection for

the tree, no cherubim, no flaming and spinning swords. It is reachable by land or by water, and approachable by all the nations. And while I agree the tree bears a striking resemblance to Jesus Christ, my hunch is that it isn't that God will move the tree to the New Jerusalem, but that God will move the New Jerusalem to the tree, bringing the biblical story full circle, and returning creation to the place it began, in Eden, in the east. Remember that in Revelation, the New Jerusalem is not said to come down upon the site of the old Jerusalem, but simply that John sees it descend. It may be far easier and faster, even for God, to build a new city than to transplant a tree and keep it alive.

I've been thinking about trees and wood a great deal these days, even before deciding to celebrate this Season of Creation. As some of you know, Flora and I live in Flora's family homestead in downtown San Jose, in a house built forty years ago. A few months ago, the tenants in the upstairs apartment moved out after fourteen years, and the post-departure inspection revealed that not only had very little been done to the place in those fourteen years but that not much had been done to it in the 26 years prior to those fourteen years! It was in need of much repair, and I have been laboring little by little to make it once again habitable, moving some walls, replacing termite-infested wood, and installing new kitchen cabinets. It was looking pretty good even before we decided that the floors really ought to be refurbished and so we called a company to sand and varnish them. And so they came and had a crack at these dark wood floors covered with decades of

dirt and wax. And after the first few passes of the mega-sander, it became clear that we were standing on something akin to the streets of gold in Revelation, nearly as beautiful and almost as valuable. It turns out that these floors are made from wood from the Surá tree, a Costa Rican tree now bordering on extinction, or at least rare enough that to install a new floor with it would run you about a hundred dollars a square meter. And so I did some research on the Surá and found that it is a Psalm One tree, meaning that it loves the riverside, and that it grows relatively rapidly at elevations of up to 1000 meters above sea level. It was, however, according to one source whom I quote, “brutally” harvested in the sixties and seventies specifically to meet the need for middle class floors such as ours! It is one of those beautiful trees you see on a rainforest walk with the buttressed root system which makes it good for keeping erosion under control. I shudder to think what the riverbeds must look like in those areas where the Surá was harvested so heavily to make my floor.

At the same time, I’ve been thinking about what to do with our newly purchased potato farm. Pretty soon the last of the potatoes planted by the previous owner will be harvested, and I’ll be left with several acres of open soil waiting to be blown away by the fierce January winds that pass through that region. This land was once, of course, all forest, but at some time in the past someone decided it should be used for agricultural purposes, and the majority of the trees were cut down. While I doubt many, if any, of them were Surá trees, I do hope they were at least used purposefully, and not simply burned, as happens far too often in the

tropics when crop or grasslands are needed. I hope that someone at least has a beautiful floor they can admire that came from the trees of my finca.

Our new place is not the only deforested place in the world; statistics are available everywhere about the difficult relationship between deforestation and global warming, desertification, and declining water and soil quality, to name just a few of the interrelated issues. As serious as these threats are, they are really only part of the story, because each of those ecological problems is accompanied by a social component, one that does not often become apparent until you are in the midst of it. Several years ago, Flora and I had the opportunity to visit Haiti on a church mission trip, in an area where there was nary a tree to be found, not even ones “good for food,” much less trees that were pleasant to the sight. Not only for the absence of trees, but I think in good measure because of it, the community where we were was a community of despair, depression, and dust. Among the challenges these people faced were wind and dust, or wind and mud, and a monochrome palette for a landscape, where brown, barren hillsides gave way to brown, dry flatlands. I even remember that the color of the hills was nearly the same as the hair of many of the children, turned a reddish-brown by the malnutrition they experienced. Both as we flew in and as we flew out, I saw that the area we had experienced was by no means singular in the Haitian landscape, neither ecologically, nor socially. Deforestation had taken its toll in more ways than one.

And so I have been thinking about reforesting our land with trees, maybe Surá trees if they will grow there, maybe some other species. Their presence may not mean a whole lot to anyone but Flora and me and whatever few animals might remain after all the potatoes have been harvested, but it seems like the right thing to do, if only that they be a reminder to someone, sometime, of the marvelous and humbling fact that, as one Costa Rican forester puts it, “el más glorioso invento de la Humanidad no es capaz de ofrecer el más simple de los beneficios que brinda un árbol,” that even the most glorious of human inventions cannot offer the simplest of benefits a tree can offer. You see, at the end of any debate you can have about creation or evolution, the fact remains that although human beings might be able to help a tree grow taller or straighter, we can’t create one from scratch, at least not yet. That is a right and privilege reserved for God, and that is God’s gift from the Alpha to the Omega, from trees in the garden “good for food and pleasant to the sight,” to a tree in the city “with its twelve kinds of fruit...and leaves for the healing of the nations.” You see, the only three things present at the beginning that are prophesied as present at the end are a river and a tree and God. Now it is true that it is the other story of creation in the first chapter of Genesis that tells us that God looked upon creation and declared it good, but it is not a stretch to imagine it included in the second version as well. And it is that goodness, of God, river, and tree, that makes it possible that in the New Jerusalem, “nothing accursed will be found there any more.” The humble tree we so often take for granted is our symbol

of God's promises kept, of the shalom which God intends for us and for all people, and all creation. That is the simplest benefit of a tree; not its shade, its sound, its fruit, or even its erosion preventing capabilities, as valuable as all of those are. It is the simple presence of a tree that reminds us of both our beginning and our end, and the care of our God in between.

I wonder if that isn't the real reason God put the Tree of Life under armed guard, so that at the end of time there might be at least one tree left, so that in our zeal to transform our environment, or to make a profit, or to make firewood or furniture, we wouldn't clear-cut, along with all the rest of the world's forests, the very Tree of Life itself. And so I have to ask myself, if that one tree is so valuable, so worthy of protection, so life-giving, whether just symbolically or also biologically, if we hadn't ought to look after its brethren a little more carefully, for all the life-bringing they do. You don't need me to offer you a list of statistics about the ecological, or even social value of trees. But perhaps I could challenge you to ask our Mission Committee to take a look at the possibility of ECF being the hands of Christ by planting some trees somewhere, so that those trees might be a blessing to their communities in the ways trees are biologically good at doing, but also as a witness to God's creative power and the promise contained therein. As those billboards everywhere say, "A que sembrás un árbol;" I dare you to plant a tree in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.