

SUNDAY July 6, 2025 “God’s Trees”

Genesis 2:9, 16-17 3:6-7, 22-24 and Proverbs 11:30

Revelation 22:1-5, Mark 11:12-25 Luke 19:1-10

It is the summer of '25--which does not seem to make a lot of sense when I've heard the song Summer of 69 played often as this season of hot hazy humid days fully begins. We are here on this July Sunday in 2025 and begin our “At Your Request” summer series based on requests by individuals from the congregation. Our focus today is on “God’s trees.”

To begin, let us just think about trees for what they do and how important they are to all of creation. What role do they play in history and what is their significance to the world today? Trees are important ecologically speaking, but they are also important to our understanding of faith in God and what God intended for us at the beginning of creation. When given this idea of trees at first the passages to which I was going to focus upon were the trees found in Genesis and Revelation but when thinking and reflecting on trees- there are a lot more instances of where trees are mentioned in the Bible. In fact other than people and God, trees are the most mentioned living thing in the Bible. Trees are mentioned in the beginning in Genesis 1: 11-12, in the middle the first Psalm 1:3 and in Revelation 22. But why? Why are trees so significant in the Bible? Because God made them and they are pleasing to the eye.

So let us take a moment to look at trees. From Genesis 1:11-12 we read of fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it. And then in Genesis 2 in God’s garden (Eden) the tree of life is found in the middle and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is close by. He place Adam there and told him eat any fruit of the garden but not of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil- for if you do, you will die. Adam is given clear instructions. But as we learn in chapter 3, the woman God made saw that the fruit of this very same tree was good for food and it looked so good, and it would make her wise she ate and he ate. And as a result their eyes were opened. Eventually God put Adam and Eve out of His garden. God put angels near the tree of life to guard it. This tree of life is also referred to in Revelation 22 with its 12 kinds of fruit being produced each month and its leaves bringing healing.

There are also different kinds of trees mentioned in the Bible. Cedar, oak, vine, olive trees are named and in their various contexts, they describe their strength function and value to the community nearby.

One such tree is a sycamore tree which grew near the streets of communities. And it is this tree which was growing on the wayside of Jericho when a short man decided to use a tree in order to see and be seen by Jesus who was to pass by that way. Sycamores grow fairly tall and are strong and able to carry the weight of people. So this is what Zaccheus does: he climbs

up in its branches and waits. This was not a regular occurrence for people to see a man in a tree. So when Jesus walks by, he looks up into the tree and sees this man. Zaccheus is known by the community for what he does as a tax collector who cheats people out of their money and is wealthy. Zaccheus is a money guy and he has heard that Jesus is stirring up crowds in different communities and not for the good of all. But something inside him has also stirred as he wanted to see Jesus. Jesus sees him and calls him to come down. Jesus invites himself to Zaccheus' house because Jesus knows that salvation will come to the house. He knows that it is for people like Zaccheus that he came. In this story, the sycamore tree is a means by which Zaccheus is seen by Jesus and is known to be big and shady. A real comfortable place to wait for Jesus and for Jesus to see him.

But trees were also used to illustrate Jesus' power and might. In Mark 11 Jesus is hangry-- hungry and then eventually angry. He walks near a fig tree in search of food. However it was not yet its season to bear fruit, so Jesus yells at the tree stating, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." The disciples heard him say it. A couple of days later the disciples and Jesus pass by the fig tree which has now withered away. Jesus' response was simply, 'Have faith in God.' And then he shares a teaching about prayer and faith in God. Jesus also teaches about the need for forgiveness. Was this tree to blame or simply was Jesus frustrated about what he was doing or that the people were turning away from God?

When we think about trees we often focus on individual plants-- like the biggest tree in volume found in California's Sequoia National Park. It is a sequoia (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*) known as General Sherman boasting about 52,500 cubic feet in volume. It is not the tallest it is huge. The tallest also a sequoia is "The Hyperion" which reaches a staggering 379.1 feet high! Both of these trees are not protected by National Park services now due to deforestation which is taking place close to this forest.

But trees we know sustain life by managing and absorbing carbon dioxide through photosynthesis and produce sugars for growth and releasing oxygen. This process helps to reduce the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere and mitigate climate change. We hear of many wildfires burning thousands of hectares of forests in various regions of the continent but do we do enough?

In 1971, Dr. Seuss wrote "The Lorax" a children's book which chronicles the plight of the environment. This creature, the Lorax, "speaks for the trees" and confronts the young business man who causes environmental destruction and leads the reader to reflect on trees and the environment. The story encourages activism and involvement in improving the situation. The

Lorax states, "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not".

Another tree that needs exploring is the cross upon which Jesus died. 1 Peter 2:24 - *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.* This cross was erected at Calvary and it is where Jesus suffered and died. We have sung words in praise of God's gift of Jesus to us and refer to the cross as a tree. *For God so loved the World , He gave His only Son, To die on Calvary's tree, From sin to set me free; Some day He's coming back, What glory that will be! Wonderful His love to me.* But do we acknowledge the cross as a tree when often the image of a tree is filled with life not a place of death. However, we must recognize that Christ rose from death and so the tree or cross for us is a symbol of hope and life eternal.

This leads us to passages in the Bible which may not feature trees but every major character and theological event in the Bible has an associated tree. Trees in the Bible are far more than just botanical elements. They serve as powerful symbols with deep theological and spiritual significance, enriching the biblical narrative and offering profound insights into God's character and plan for humanity. This is true of the phrase 'a tree of life'

Proverbs 11:30 *"The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, but violence takes lives away."* This may also be translated as "but a 'wise man' takes lives away." This same passage in the New Living Translation states: *"The seeds of good deeds become a tree of life; a wise person wins friends."*

This is a wonderful faith-filled statement which calls those who believe, to bear fruit in your own life so that you can reach out to others. This means that when one lives life following the teachings of Christ, they bear seeds and pass them on to others. When these seeds are shared the one giving them grows stronger in faith and is like a tree filled with life. So one must first live and bear fruit for God's sake before you can speak to others about change in their lives. That is, to serve God one must first live, understand and receive God's blessings before serving others.

Another reading from Proverbs 13: 12 states *"Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life."* If what one desires is not obtained in the time expected, often one's heart and soul are grieved and pained by the delay and waiting. But when the desired thing finally is apparent it becomes "a tree of life" whereby your heart and soul are encouraged and revived. This reflects the two aspects of hope: 1) a conative or desire for something and 2) the cognitive (belief) in the possibility of its fulfillment. These aspects are true in all matters, both spiritual and natural.

God's trees include the ones in Eden- knowledge of good and evil, and tree of life, as well as those which played pivotal roles in their stories- ie Moses and the burning bush, and Zaccheus and the sycamore, as well as the fig tree and Jesus we recognize the important role of trees. Yet when we think of the cross upon which Jesus died, we may see it as a dead tree which caused those nailed to it to die a horrible death. Yet this tree upon which Jesus died has become a symbol of life everlasting. The Tree of life.

Our reading from Revelation 22 points us to a time and place where the tree of life will be found again. It will be when a new heaven and earth comes. When there is no death, no darkness, but only life everlasting. And it will be where one day all of Christ's followers will gather and become whole.

When we think about trees, they are really God's investment in the future of humanity. On each birthday, they are the only living thing to which God adds a ring. Let us give thanks to God for trees and how they are a gift to us in history, as well as the present and future.

God of grace we praise you and thank you for trees and what they may mean to us as we grow stronger in faith and understanding. Bless us O God as we reflect on the tree of life which offers us hope both desire and belief. Hear us O God as we offer our praise in this time of prayer.
AMEN>