

## Midweek of Lent 4

# Tree to Tree: The Tree of Life to the Cross

Texts: Genesis 2:15–17; 3:22–24; John 3:14–15

### Textual Notes

Genesis 2:15–17; 3:22–24

**2:15:** God placed man in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it. Work itself is not a result of sin, as we see in this pre-fall verse. Rather, work becomes difficult and burdensome as a result of sin, but it is not a part of the curse in and of itself.

**Vv. 16–17:** God provides Adam with the first command: “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.” It is important that man has a command in order that he might show his love of God through his obedience. Luther called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil the first altar where Adam and Eve came to worship by being obedient and not eating of it. Thus, they were able to show love to the One who first loved them.

“for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die”: It is difficult to know what concept Adam has of death, since it was not a part of the perfect creation. However, the serious tone of God’s command should have been enough for him to know that death was not a desirable outcome.

**3:22–24:** (See notes from Lent 1.)

**Vv. 22–24:** Adam and Eve are barred from the tree of life and its fruit. While this is a “grace act” of God, they may not have understood it that way at first. They most certainly understood the pain of being separated from the garden and from the face of God. Now they would live out their days waiting in faith for the fulfillment of the promise of Genesis 3:15.

John 3:14–15

**Vv. 14–15:** These verses are, in part, Jesus’ answer to Nicodemus’s question in verse 9, “How can these things be?” Jesus then connects Himself to the Old Testament using a type: “Just as . . .” In this manner, Christ shows how all of Scripture, Old and New, points to and speaks of Him.

The connecting event is the people of Israel’s unfaithfulness in Numbers 21:4–9. When the people started to grumble and complain about the “worthless food” (manna), the Lord sent fiery serpents into their midst that bit them, and they died. When they cried out in repentance, the Lord instructed Moses to make a bronze fiery serpent and set it on a pole. Everyone who was bitten and then looked to the bronze serpent lived.

Jesus is pointing back to Moses and the bronze serpent and also pointing forward to His

crucifixion when He will be raised up on a tree, a cross, for the salvation of man. At first read, one might be confused as to why Jesus connects Himself to the bronze serpent. However, as the bronze serpent reminded the Israelites of their sin and the death that resulted, so also Christ reminds us of our sin (He who knew no sin became sin) and the death that it brings. As we look upon the cross, we see our sin; yet, we also see our Savior.

### The Tree Motif

The hymn “The Tree of Life” by Stephen Starke (*Lutheran Service Book* 561) is an excellent overview of this motif. While Adam and Eve are cut off from this life-giving tree because of their sin, the Lord God promises to provide—not only a way back into the garden, but also a way to new life by the tree of life: the cross of Calvary. Ultimately, we will see this tree of life again in the courts of everlasting life as described in Revelation 22.

There are other connections to this tree motif. As Abraham and Isaac ascend Mount Moriah to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice, Isaac bears the wood upon which he will be sacrificed. In Hebrew, wood and tree are the same word. During the Exodus, when there are bitter waters of death, Moses throws a piece of wood into the waters, and they become sweet and life-giving.

In the “Tree” motif, the wood of the tree is a means by which life is given, whether by way of nourishment or through sacrifice. So, the tree of life in the Garden of Eden points to the tree of life where Christ dies that we might live, and then it points further to the new Eden, the heavenly courts, where the tree of life bears the twelve fruits for the life of the nations.

### Sermon

Man begins his journey in this world in a garden. Adam and Eve are established in the Garden of Eden, surrounded by various other God-created creatures and God-created vegetation. And, the Word of the Lord distinguishes, speaks specifically about, two trees: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We are told that both trees were in the middle of the garden, perhaps side by side.

There at the foot of one tree, Adam and Eve worship as they show their love for God by being obedient to His command to not eat from it—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. There at the foot of the other tree, they receive the gift of life immortal, life everlasting. Two important trees, as man and woman seek to live and walk in the presence of their Lord and their God.

And then . . . there is sin. Adam and Eve disobey God, and they eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They give in to the whispers of the evil one as the ancient serpent entices them. “You will not surely die,” whispers Satan. “You can be like God.” And they listen. They eat; they disobey. The worm of sin burrows into their hearts. In truth, all of creation becomes infected with the parasite of sin, and this sin separates us from God.

We are separated from God by this dividing wall of hostility; we are cast out from the

beautiful garden; we are removed from the presence of the other tree, the tree of life. The cherubim and the flaming sword guard the path back to this tree, lest man eat from it and live forever. Man has been cast out, exiled from the garden, but also exiled from life itself. God knows that if man eats of this tree of life as a sinner that the life bestowed by its fruit will be a fate worse than death, because to live forever as sin continues to ravage you, both body and soul, is a curse too terrible to behold. Sin must first be dealt with—atoned for, washed away—before life everlasting is a blessing and joy.

But how does one first deal with sin? The fact that man is a sinner forbids him from being part of the solution. Sin-filled man is the problem, and he is unable to do anything that would solve the problem. Mankind is stumbling blindly and bumbling helplessly through this journey of life. He cannot, even by accident, address the problem of sin. And so, life eludes him; a restored relationship with God is an impossibility. A return to what God intended for man from the beginning is beyond man's reach.

Beyond man's reach, but not beyond the reach of God! For just as man was overcome by a tree, so also must the Son of Man by a tree overcome. The issue, the problem, the devastating disaster of sin requires another tree. God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son. Jesus, God's Son, comes into our flesh and blood that He might crush the ancient serpent and pay the price demanded by sin. Christ Jesus comes into our flesh because of the kind of price demanded: blood. Only blood can pay the price and wash away sin. Only the blood of the Lamb—the Lamb who has no blemish or spot, who is a perfect sacrifice, a holy and precious offering—only the blood of the Lamb is required . . . and a tree.

The Son of Man must be lifted up upon a tree just as the bronze serpent was lifted up by Moses in the wilderness. The tree of the cross—an instrument of torture, suffering, and death—is the tree upon which Jesus is lifted up. On the cross, Jesus suffers and dies. On the cross, His holy and precious blood is shed. On the cross, Jesus lays down His life that our lives might be restored. A perfect sacrifice brings salvation and restoration to the crown of God's creation.

Thus, Jesus turns an instrument of death into a tree of life. His death brings us life, life eternal. Our exile from the presence of God has been ended. Our exile from the tree of life is over. Christ Jesus has taken the sins of all the world to the tree and been lifted up for all to see, and from there, He draws all men to Himself. The cross reunites us with our God as the gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation are bestowed. No longer do we wander aimlessly, blindly in search of a solution to sin. Now, we gather at the foot of the cross, we gather at the new tree of life and gaze upon the One who became sin for us that we might be saved.

Tree to tree. The tree of life to the tree of the cross—another life-giving tree. A journey from life to death and back to life. We have been restored to life and reunited with our God. Now, each day, as we continue our journey through this life as the children of God, we focus our eyes upon that which the apostle John describes in the Book of Revelation: "The angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve

kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:1–2). This is the life that has been restored to us: life everlasting, life in the courts of heaven, life in the presence of the Lamb, life that is ours in Christ Jesus. A return from exile, a return to our God by way of a tree. In Jesus’ name. Amen.