

“Every Tree a Tree of Life”

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

Sunday, October 22, 2023

Texts: Jonah 4: 1-11 and Revelation 22: 1-6

For a lot of us, things have gotten scary in this world. War has erupted again in the Middle East, with great risk that it will expand and draw more nations and other actors into the conflict. Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine still is going on, even though the news seems to have forgotten. In this country, we can't elect a Speaker of the House of Representatives, and our nation faces yet another government shutdown – among other crises. Hate crimes are on the increase. An auto workers strike continues. More and more people need housing, heating and food assistance as we enter into the winter months. From one perspective, things look bleak. We wonder what a faithful response is to all that is happening in the world. It seems the last place we'd look is to the book of Revelation in our Bible. Eugene Boring, in his commentary on the book of Revelation says that there is “no other part of the Bible [that] has provided such a happy hunting ground for all sorts of bizarre and dangerous interpretations. Some people in every generation [since Revelation was compiled] have understood Revelation to be predicting the last days of the world in their own time.” It may be that all of the wars and

rumors of wars, and other bad things in our world signify the end of time as we know it. I highly doubt it, but even if true, I think Revelation has a lot more to say to our present day than the doom and gloom that gets promoted most of the time. In fact, I think it interesting that most who quote Revelation leave out the last chapters completely. It's hard to talk about God's wrath and judgment, when the end of the book speaks of a new Jerusalem, a city on a hill, a restored creation on this planet, not just in heaven somewhere. In the scripture we study today, we hear of the tree of life – much the same tree of life in the other scripture that is only partly shared, Genesis 2.

Daniel Cooperrider says it this way:

The last chapters of Revelation which culminate in the final Tree of Life image present the most detailed and striking vision of what Jesus often talked about as the kingdom of God – that dream of a more beautiful world yet-to-come, a world of redemption, shalom, salvation; a world where God will dwell with us and, as the scripture imagines it “death will be no more, and mourning and crying and pain will be no more,” and we will see things in the true light of God, even seeing God, no longer “through a glass darkly” as we do in this life, but with perfect clarity, face-to-face. And right in the middle of the redeemed world our scripture imagines that there will be a 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.” (Cooperrider, p135).

Why are Christians so quick to accept God's punishment and exclusion, wrath and destructive power, while not at the same time accepting God's grace, mercy,

healing, inclusion and restoration? It is a question that has boggled my mind throughout my life. Maybe it's because we're a bit like Jonah.

Perhaps you remember Jonah? According to the scripture (not likely an actual historical event), Jonah is sent to the "wicked" people of Nineveh. He resists, but after some personal time in the belly of a fish, he goes to Nineveh, relates God's message of warning, and watches as the people listen and turn back to God. He was successful! And yet, at the end of the book, we find Jonah beneath a shrub that God provided, complaining and whining that God had not judged Nineveh.

Why is it we think it faithful to will the destruction of others, but so wrong to take pity on them? God asks that bluntly of Jonah. "Yet for my part, can't I pity Nineveh, that great city..."

It seems that so many people of faith – not just Christians, but maybe especially Christians – are bent on revenge, retaliation, and destruction. At the same time, we sing, "Let There Be Peace on Earth" and pine that it would begin with us. Then we go home and find the latest scapegoat for our rage. Even Jonah believed that his anger at the shrub (and ultimately at God) was justified. How easy it is to justify our rage as well. Using that justification for what we call "just war" to destroy our adversaries, whether personal or national.

Meanwhile, there's this little thing called scripture. In it we do find a God of wrath in several places throughout our Bible. And yet, we seem to selectively leave out the places in which God is merciful, kind, just and bent on our salvation. The twenty first and twenty second chapters of Revelation are prime examples. "On each side of the river is the tree of life..." Revelation tells us, "The tree's leaves are for the healing of the nations. There will no longer be any curse. The throne of God and the Lamb will be in it, and God's servants will worship God...Night will be no more. They won't need the light of the lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will shine on them..."

Further, "according to the vision in Revelation, in the end people don't go up to heaven, but heaven, the holy realm, comes down to us. God comes down to earth to dwell with us, and the Tree of Life is planted here, not in some other world beyond this one, but on this very earth, in this very world. This is a thoroughly ecological vision that imagines this earth as the location of salvation. It is one thing to think that God is preparing an unimaginably beautiful heaven-palace for us in a world beyond this one, something like we might dream is beyond the pearly gates. But it's an entirely different way of thinking about it to look around at this world – even with its injustices, and heartbreak, and unmet longing – and to see it as a world getting ready for heaven to arrive. To look

around and to think about preparing this world as a place that's fit for God to dwell. ***Revelation and the Tree of Life invite us not to try to see or envision a different world, but to see and envision this world differently (emphasis mine).***" (Cooperrider, pp135-136).

I'm not at all saying not to be angry, or not to hope for a world that is better than this one. I'm not at all saying that we can't be frightened, or saddened, or angered, by what is happening in the world around us. We can even be angry at God, and not only live to talk about it, but grow in the process. What I am saying is that the role of Christians is to do what we can do so that peace does really begin with us as we sing so sweetly in the song. It begins with not seeking revenge, not pronouncing God's judgment on those things we don't understand, not finding ways to exclude, judge and harm, but instead to find ways to reach out, to love, and to include. We won't always get it right. For contrary to popular belief, we are not God. We don't know how to practice perfect love. And yet, we clearly do know how to be loving. We do know how to listen before we speak. We do know that sometimes the things that challenge us most are the things that grow us the most as well.

We're wasting time, energy, money, and a host of other things insisting that we are always right and that things should go according to our plan. There's a lot of Jonah in all of us. But "the Tree of Life is awaiting us – that ultimate symbol of the indivisible, integral, interconnected web of life. (Cooperrider, p137)." Our task is to do our best to live in an indivisible, integral, interconnected web of life. That, my friends, is hard work. It's a lot easier to will the destruction of those who are not like us. It's a lot easier to call on God to destroy another than it is to find ways to love them.

Cooperrider ends this section of the book on trees in a way that I hope you find instructive, faithful, and maybe even challenging. But in the end, I hope you most find it hopeful in what looks like a hopeless, good-for-nothing, self-destructive world:

In the Biblical imagination, the Tree of Life is not just a little bit of the future. It is the future. Standing in for the whole evolutionary unfolding of life, for the whole generative cosmos itself, finding the Tree of Life flourishing at the end of time teaches us that our own future is inseparable from the larger, ecological community on which we are directly dependent. Looking back at us from the future – looming over us as we journey in the meantime – the Tree of Life guides us with the central tenet that graciously and fatefully and finally, all life on Earth is interconnected. The Tree of Life says right here, on this planet – this is to be the place of salvation.

I know it is hard for us to believe. I think the faith that takes the most work is the most authentic. If it seems easy, it may not be faithful. Just a thought.

But in the meantime, as we figure it out: Every tree is a tree of life.

Alleluia! Amen.