

March 14, 2018 – 1 Peter 2:21-25 & John 12:20-36

Gardens are places of life. At least they're supposed to be. The feeble attempts that my wife and I have made at gardening haven't been quite so lively. But, by and large, when you think of the word "garden" you think of some place full of life.

Green plants and colorful flowers and tasty fruits & vegetables. And, of course, all of the birds and animals and insects that go along with that kind of place. A place full of life.

A few weeks ago we talked about the Garden of Eden. About how it was paradise. It was paradise, first and foremost, because God was there. But second, and closely related to that, it was paradise because it was a place of life.

A place with all of those lively characteristics of a garden that we know so well. But, even more so, a place of life because it contained a tree of life. The Tree of Life. A tree that, according to God's Word, would cause those who eat of it to never die.

Which makes sense at first glance. The Tree of Life gives us life. A perfect garden has perfect trees. This doesn't seem that unusual.

But think about that for a second. It was a perfect world. A world without sin. And according to Romans 5, where there is no sin, there is no death either. Which means Adam and Eve wouldn't have died whether they had a tree of life or not. So why did God put it there? What purpose does the Tree of Life serve in a world without death?

Well, in a sense, it didn't serve any purpose, at that point in time. It only had a purpose after they sinned. After God cast them out of the Garden. After he barred the way to the Tree of Life with an angel and a flaming sword.

At that point, the Tree of Life became the most important tree in the world. Because it was exactly what we needed. It was the cure to this curse of death that we had brought down on ourselves. It was the secret to immortality.

So why did God take it away? Why did God give us the Tree of Life when we didn't need it. And take it away the moment that we did need it? Isn't that a little backwards?

Well, not really. Because think what that would mean. A world full of sin, yet without death. A world full of evil, deceitful, corrupt people, who only get better at their evil and deceit and corruption as they get older, but they never die. They live on and on in their depravity and suffering. Without any death to end it.

I think we've just described hell. Or something pretty close to it. It's actually a nightmarish thing to consider. Sin that leads to death is awful. But sin that doesn't lead to death is even worse.

And so, God took the Tree of Life away from us. And, in a way, we can be thankful he did. But that still doesn't answer the question, "Why did he create it in the first place?"

Well, I'm always hesitant to delve into the mind of God in such ways. Asking "why did God do things one way and not another" is often a maze that has no exit. But in this case, I think we've got a pretty good answer.

Because in the Tree of Life, God was indeed giving us a glimpse of what we needed. We need life. Eternal life. A return to paradise. But not just life like we have it now. Not eternal life filled with sin and suffering. Not a superficial paradise, emptied of the things that make it good.

No, we need true life. Life without sin. Without suffering. Life that has everything evil in this world carried away on the shoulders of someone who can bear that load. Someone who can endure temptation and yet remain holy and blameless. Someone who can walk into the muck of sin, get covered with it, and yet walk out clean. Because that's the only way we will be rescued.

That's what Christ did on the cross. Peter tells us in our epistle that he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree. He was faced by the worst temptations anyone can experience. Not just the temptation of the devil in the wilderness. But the temptation in the Garden of Gethsemane. The temptation to simply walk away from his mission and say, "My will be done." Not, "Thy will be done."

He saw humanity at our absolute worst. People fill with such self-righteousness that they would knowingly condemn an innocent man to death. And yet, it didn't lead him to revile them or threaten them. Rather he entrusted himself to his Father and simply responded, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Jesus was cursed so that we are not. He was hung on a tree and given a cursed man's death. So that his tree of death might be our Tree of Life.

That's what the Tree of Life was always pointing towards. God knew from before the creation of the world that humanity would fall into sin. God knew from the moment he planted that garden that humanity would need a Tree of Life. Not in those sinless first days of creation. But later, after humanity fell into sin.

The Tree of Life was a prophecy. A prophecy of hope. A prophecy of the cross. Where Christ's own Body and Blood become fruit leading to eternal life for all who eat and drink of them.

What was death for Christ is life for us. As Jesus says in our Gospel lesson, as a seed must fall to the ground and die – or so it appears to us, at least – in order that it might grow and bear abundant fruit, so also he himself must be raised on the cross and die in order that we might receive the fruit from his tree of the cross.

He hated his life because he loved us. He lost his life so that we might find ours. He became a servant of all so that we might become children of God.

He could have easily said, "Father, save me from this hour." He could have said it as he hung dying on the cross. Or at the Garden of Gethsemane. Or at his baptism. Or before he was born. Or before the creation of this world that he knew would become so sinful.

But he didn't. Because for this very purpose he came to the hour of his death. That the Father might be glorified. That the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden might point to the tree of the cross. That God might be glorified not just in giving life to perfect human beings. But, even more so, life to sinful human being. And in that life forgive their sins.

So that we might live in something more than just a hellish earth full of eternal misery and evil. But live in the glory of the resurrection. Where there is no misery or evil. For the curse of sin and death has been nailed to the cross. It has died with Jesus. And a new life was born on Easter morning.

A new light has shined on those who walked in darkness. And that light makes us sons of light. Sons not of Adam and all his weakness. But sons of a new Adam, Jesus Christ. Who took not the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But gave to all the fruit of the Tree of Life.

That this world might be a Garden. With the throne of God as it's sun. And a river of living water flowing through it. And the Tree of Life at its center. With healing for the nations. And life to all who receive its fruit.

Gardens are places of life. But this world became a place of death. And so the Son of God went to a hill called Golgotha – the Place of the Skull, the Place of Death – and planted a tree, watered and nourished by his own body and blood. That this world might be a Garden once again. Amen.