



# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *What We Can Learn from the Creation Myth in Genesis*

### *“Part 4: The Tree”*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
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**Scripture Reading:** Genesis 2:8-17

*YHWH\* planted a garden to the east, in Eden—“Land of Pleasure”—and placed in it the earth creature that had been made. Then YHWH caused every kind of tree, enticing to look at and good to eat, to spring from the soil. In the center of the garden was the Tree of Life, and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.*

*A river flows through Eden to water the garden, after which it branches into four tributaries. The first stream is named Pishon, or “Spreader.” It circles through Havilah, a land rich in gold, gold of the highest quality. There are gum resins there, and precious onyx stones. The second stream is named Gihon, or “Gusher,” and it flows through the entire land of Cush. The third stream is the Tigris, which borders Assyria on the east. The fourth stream the Euphrates. Then YHWH took the earth creature and settled it in the garden of Eden so that it might cultivate and care for the land. YHWH commanded the earth creature, “You may eat as much as you like from any of the trees of the garden— except the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. You must not eat from that tree, for on the day you eat from that tree, that is the day you will die—yes, die.”*

*\* YHWH represents the divine name found in the Hebrew text. It represents the Divine Mystery and, traditionally, is not pronounced. Instead, we say “God” or some other term of reverence.*

## Sermon

Well, again, thank you for being here. During COVID, we had to preach to empty rooms, and that was very strange. Could we shift to the tree?



Just background information. When you look at the Bible in Hebrew, there are four letters that stand for the divine name. That's what you're not supposed to say as a word. The ancient Jewish people would read it and then say, 'the Holy One,' or something like that. When you put those consonants together, they basically spelled out to be, to live, life, the root of things.

So, we could argue a lot about what God is, but what we have in common is that there's something we come out of. There's some depth that is the source of everyone. And, when we fight over that, that's a very sad thing, because that's what should call us to a common life, to a deeper understanding than we're used to.

Genesis begins with two creation stories that contradict each other. You don't hear that very often, and particularly churches that take the Bible literally. But the Bible is written, a lot of it is in cosmic poetry. A beautiful poetry that helps us go deeper into our own lives and feel our roots into things.

So, there was one creation story where they were created together, and then the story that most people are familiar with is Adam, and then Eve comes from the rib.

But none of that makes a difference if it doesn't take you deeper into who you are. To kind of have just an understanding of something that happened thousands and thousands of years ago, in my opinion, isn't as helpful as understanding right now that we come out of this divine source.

And that's particularly important in bad times to remember. What we learned doing this work with the cold weather shelter, anybody could fall into homelessness. Anybody on the face of the Earth. It takes just a string of bad luck. So, we have to find something deeper to help us get through times that are really bad. When nobody else seems to respect us from the outside, how do we find self-respect inside? We have to go deeper than what's happening to us sometimes.

One of the things a lot of people don't understand is that the ancient Jewish mystics had a great sense of humor, and they would tell these stories just like tongue in cheek. If you just look at the story like God creates a garden and says you can eat all of those trees, but don't eat this one tree. Everybody knows what's going to happen. You know human nature, you know that's the tree the person's going to want. They may not start at first, but it's like they think more and more about that one thing they can't have. That's the joyous, humble humor of the ancient Jewish mystics. That that's human nature. It doesn't help. It gets us in trouble, but it's not evil. It's just humankind. It's just who we are in a lot of ways.

Right now, in Minnesota, there's so many people that are just depressed for what's happening there. They're depressed for the fact that there's sort of a private police force now that is not accountable to anybody. And you think about how terrifyingly dangerous that is for people who live on the margins. Whatever you think of police, they're trained to deal with this kind of thing. When you put to get together a rag-tag band, particularly that have military training, and then turn that on people that live in the United States, you're going to have horrible problems. So even if you agree, you say that person should have been shot, that person should have been shot or shouldn't have been. If you have militarized police in the United States of America, that's not what the Constitution is about, that people should be protected and have a due process.

So, when we talk about love, like Jesus taught, that includes justice for people. That includes not mistreating people. It includes not shooting them, it seems to me. It seems more loving to see somebody's humanity. But the problem is too many people in the United States do their ethics based on property. If I own it, then I deserve it. And they hoard, and they're people who don't have the property rights. When you do your ethics with property rights, people without property rights don't have human rights. And to realize a lot of the problems in our country right now are that people know how to love things, but they don't know how to love people.

So, Jesus is talking about a different way. And in the poetry that we're looking at today, it's taking us deeper into understanding our own humanity. I like to look at world religions. That's one of my favorite things. And when I started researching this, years and years and years ago, I started looking at other stories that were similar in North Africa, where the traditional story that you'd see in all kinds of cultures is that God would have two trees. One was a tree of life; one was a tree of death.

God would send a messenger animal, which in this case was a snake, but it was some kind of animal that shed, either feathers or scales or something like that. And God says go tell humans to eat from the tree of life, not from the tree of death. And the messenger animal says, "Well you know, I could live forever. I would kind of like that." So, the messenger animal tells me to eat from the wrong tree.

When we go back to look at Genesis, there are two trees there. So, we're going to look at that today. Next week, we're looking at the snake and understanding what the symbol is there. But the important thing, whether you agree with anything I say today, is to use the story to go deeper into who you are. So deep that you don't judge yourself by what happens to you. So deep that you don't need the approval of other people to be who you are. That's where the story is calling us. When it talks about Adam coming from the soil, and as I said a couple of weeks ago, the word

for Adam means 'human,' but it also means clay. If his name was Clay or Sandy or Dusty, you'd understand better the joke that's being given here.

So, the first thing I want to look at is the two trees. When we only look at one of the trees and we say the Tree of Knowledge was forbidden, people think that that's saying don't be smart. Like don't go to school. But there are two trees. The first tree is the Tree of Life. That's the essence of who you are. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is your judgments about life. And they're both important, but you need to keep Life at the center and not what you think about it. Because when there are parts of life we don't like or we don't approve or we can't accept, those things come and hurt us and haunt us. We have to take Life home to understand it all.

When I was taking psychology classes, one of the professors said that we sometimes say that somebody's crazy if they've lost reason. But he said the craziest people have kept reason and lost everything else. People who you can't win an argument with. They got good reasons for all the evil things they're doing. That's the Tree of Good and Evil without the Tree of Life. If you eat the Tree of Life, then you can understand other people. But if not, you see people as good or bad.

And, that's the situation we're in in the United States. You have very, very immature people, who are judging other people in terms of what that means to them, whether they like it or not. And that is the course of great evil. We can all fall into it. But I think what the text is saying is choose your core. Choose the life within you, not your judgments about people, things, yourself. But stay in touch with that life. Choose Life, even in times when you're being judged or you're judging yourself. Realize that the Tree of Life is deeper in you than the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

The second thing that may or may not be relevant, and the people of St. Andrew's know they can disagree with me, which they do on a regular basis, and that's part of the relationship. So please feel free if this doesn't resonate with you, just to put it to the side. But the symbol of the Tree of Life in many cultures is upside down. The roots go off into the transcendent, to the source of everything, and the branches represent our sensual experience. In that case, eating from the fruit of the Tree means forgetting who you are, essentially, and judging life on how it affects you in terms of your senses.

Think how many times Jesus talks about us as being fruit trees, bearing fruit. That there's something that comes through us that we can't find outside of us. In Hinduism, they have a saying to renounce the fruit of your actions. In other words, do something because it's good and pure and beautiful, not because you get the results you want.

If you do things because they're noble, because they're good, not because they're necessarily successful at the time, then you stay in touch with the depths inside yourself. Your purpose is to bring love into the world. You can't let anybody keep you from doing that. Just because somebody else is hateful doesn't mean that you shut down the light within you. Just because somebody is lying doesn't mean that you can't teach the truth and live the truth and express the truth.

So, the second thing I get from this text is... the first was to choose Life. The second is to choose Love. No matter what happens, to realize that's the core and ground of your being, and nobody can rob that from you.

The last thing was fascinating to me when I discovered this. I'm a nerd, in case you haven't figured that out yet. I was reading ancient Jewish manuscripts and found it very interesting that the word for forbidden fruit was 'ecological.' It was you protect a young tree until the fruit is ready to be eaten.

So that means that God wasn't trying to keep people from having knowledge. It's they weren't ready for it yet. They hadn't eaten from the Tree of Life first. And so, like so many people right now, they hate foreigners, but they don't know any, because they live in their ideas, they live in their judgments.

This is a time of tremendous immaturity. Do you remember not that long ago, the leader of the free world said that people from Haiti were eating our pets? Now, what's stupider than that? They couldn't point one pet that had been eaten. And in Texas, they're saying people are trying to sneak in Sharia law, playing off the fear people have of Muslims. Can you name one city that's fallen to Sharia law?

So, we go deeper, and we don't let the confusion of other people make us hate them, or ourselves, or anyone else. We rely on that love. And the wonderful thing is, even when we live in a time of great unfairness, when we can't get what we want out of life, we still can plant a seed for the future.

There's nothing that can keep you from being an ambassador for a better world. You don't need anybody's approval. You don't need any credentials whatsoever.

So, the story by itself of the Garden of Eden can sound kind of silly. Mark Twain looked at it and he said, "*If God was really smart... he's being sarcastic. If God was really smart, he would have made the snake forbidden, and then Adam would have eaten the snake*". That's somebody that knows human nature, right? But it's a joke all along. It's trying to help us understand who we are, how we get lost, how we get confused, and how we find our roots again.

Don't let all of the storms of life rob you of your own roots. There are two trees in the garden, the Tree of Judgment, the Tree of Life. Make sure you eat the Tree of Life first, that you don't fall into your judgments about yourself or other people or life. That when you don't know what to do, you choose Life. And then when there's storms, you don't let the storm extinguish the love within you. Nothing can take that from you if you don't give it away.

And then finally to realize that it's some of the worst times of humanity. It was the people that kept being faithful when nobody could turn it around, when it seemed hopeless, and they kept loving. They kept learning. Those were the ambassadors of a better day that have led us to this point. And please know that's who you are, too. Don't let hate make you hate. Don't make ignorance and dishonesty make you ignorant and dishonest. Always choose Love and know that the seeds you plant are the highest gift you can give for people yet to be.

Thank you very much for your attention. We usually take a minute for you to think about how you would understand it. If you disagree, that's fine. But how do you understand the text? So, we'll take a minute.

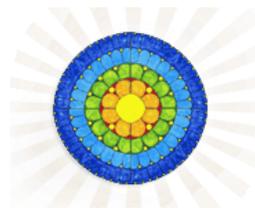
## Benediction

Thank you again for spending this time with us. It's a hard time for so many people, and it's hard to know as a minister what to say to comfort people. I don't think anybody wants to hear a political sermon at the same time when our neighbors are being hurt and wounded and oppressed. We're called to do justice as well as to love, mercy, and kindness.

As you go out to this week, realize that you have a gift inside you. Nobody's ever seen that before. Give it this week. In your own way, your own timing. It may be a gift of music, of the ability to listen to people, but know that you have a gift that nobody else in the world has. The world is blessed to have you in it. This church community feels very blessed to have you as a part of our extended community.

So as you go out in this world, know that you carry the sacred love that gave you birth is within you. We sometimes call that the Heavenly Parent but it's whatever the source is you came out of. And we sometimes call the personal love Jesus, but it lives inside us. It gives us life and being. It guides us. That love goes with you. And it's finally a mysterious love that we call the Holy Spirit that binds us together with every other being, whether we want to or not. These three loves go with you now and remain with you always. Go in peace. Amen.

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.*



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