

## “Leaves and Fruit”

*First in a series on Being a Tree of Life*

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Genesis 2.8-14; Revelation 22.1-2

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God is the Creator. The Bible gives us different ways of describing God's creating work.<sup>1</sup> This is from one of them, in Genesis, the “Book of Beginnings.”<sup>2</sup> Listen and imagine.

*The Lord God planted a garden in Eden in the east and put there the human he had formed. In the fertile land, the Lord God grew every beautiful tree with edible fruit, and also he grew the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*

*A river flows from Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides into four headwaters. The name of the first river is the Pishon. It flows around the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. That land's gold is pure, and the land also has sweet-smelling resins and gemstones. The name of the second river is the Gihon. It flows around the entire land of Cush. The name of the third river is the Tigris, flowing east of Assyria; and the name of the fourth river is the Euphrates.<sup>3</sup>*

This is God's word of life.

Picture it. A river, one that becomes four. These form one of civilization's cradles. These days, we call this land “Iraq.”

The river flows through a delightful Garden, planted by God. Eden is full of trees. Two get special attention — the Life Tree and the Knowing-Good-and-Bad Tree. But there are so many good trees, with leaves beautiful to behold, and fruit delicious.

This story has so much. For now, I'm focusing on trees. We don't live in Eden. Still, we have trees! And we're are tree too.

II

I don't know much about trees, but I'm learning more. These days, I'm seeing how a tree can help us see ourselves. I mean, us as Jesus' people. People whom he has been, and keeps on bringing together into these bunches we call “congregations.”

Imagining our Jesus-community as like a tree is helping me. Because I'm confused.

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<sup>1</sup> These different ways are delightfully explored in William P. Brown, [The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder](#) (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> The word “genesis” comes from a Greek word which means “origin.” The Hebrew name for this writing is *bereshith*, which means “the beginning.”

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 2:8-14 (Common English Bible)

It's the pandemic. It's more than the pandemic. It will end. But I don't think we'll get back to the way things were. Sure, in some ways, we will. In important ways, our church-community together will not. Not to the way things were.

It's not just because things are *always changing*. Of course they are.

It's that (to be blunt) the church which, for generations, we were used to being, was already *slowly collapsing*.<sup>4</sup>

How we were used to doing things, how we were fitting within our broader community and culture, these were already changing. The power we once had, our influence, was already slipping away. The ways people think — us included — about faith, about God, about what a good life is, about how reality works, were already transforming and fragmenting.

This was not all bad. Not at all! Still, it was already happening. Also, disorienting. *Why weren't things the way they used to be? What would we do about it? We were already wondering.*

I don't think the pandemic is disrupting that disruption. It's speeding it up. It's not taking us in new directions. It's accelerating this direction we were already going in. What's been happening over decades and centuries, has now been happening in months. Whenever the pandemic is over, we won't get to go back. There is no reverse gear.

If you were feeling disoriented about church and change before . . . now it feels like I've got a bag over my head, I'm being spun around. While I'm still whirling, I've got to pin the tail. And the donkey keeps moving.

I feel wheezy. Sad. And scared.

### III

And . . . I believe, as strongly as ever, that we belong to Jesus. And he is not finished with us. In fact, we are a group of his people he is calling together for this place and this time.

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<sup>4</sup> What I'm saying is specific to the so-called "western world," those societies rooted in Europe and its colonial offspring. The particular relationship between the Christian church(es) and the society that characterized these societies is commonly called "Christendom." It is a closely-linked relationship, wherein the Christian outlook dominated and was intertwined with the society. This what true even where "church" and "state" have been formally or informally separated, such as the Unites States of America. Christendom is commonly dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> century, when the Roman emperor Constantine embraced the until-then-marginalized religion. By the early Middle Ages, it was well-entrenched throughout Europe.

We are not qualified. I wasn't trained for this. None of us were. The old-dog tricks we learned well and are really good at, our go-to solutions and time-honoured techniques . . . a lot of them won't help us with what's ahead.

Still, Jesus keeps on calling us. He keeps filling us with his Spirit. He keeps giving us what we need. And he won't stop. We don't make ourselves. He does. The work we are about, it's his.

Instead of experts, we're more like explorers, discovering new things. Sometimes we'll find ourselves lost. But that doesn't end the journey. And experimenters, trying things out. Some will work. Some won't. We can always learn, explore, and experiment more. Jesus is not finished with us.

In times like these, we need to realize what is core. What is at the centre of who we are and what we're about. Then, how do we live and do that, here and now.

This brings me back to trees.

#### IV

That first reading, about the trees and river in the garden, it's from the second page in my Bible. This is from the second-to-last page. It's in the final writing that ties it all together, the Book of Revelation. It's an "apocalypse." Apocalypse is a type of literature. It uses powerful images and deep symbolism, to unveil for us what is going on behind the scenes. In its own confusing way, it helps better see the past, present and future.

I'm zooming in on one bit, near the very end. This is part of God's promise for all things. Because God is good! God's redeeming and restoring, making-new and completing work will get done. God will do it.

And this involves us now. So listen and imagine.

*Then the angel showed me the river of life-giving water, shining like crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb through the middle of the city's main street. On each side of the river is the tree of life, which produces twelve crops of fruit, bearing its fruit each month. The tree's leaves are for the healing of the nations.<sup>5</sup>*

This is God's word of life.

Before, a garden. Now, a city, both alive with God's Presence. Again, a river. Beside it — strangely, it says it's on both sides — a tree. That old Life Tree.

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<sup>5</sup> Revelation 22.1-2 (Common English Bible)

If we had continued in the Genesis story, we'd have seen where humanity becomes morally corrupted, because it does not trust God. So we are cut off from the Life Tree. Here though, in this final imagery of God's promise, the Tree is back. Its never-ending fruit is feeding us. Its leaves are for healing the nations, all people.

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Leaves. Fruit. When you see a tree in the distance, it's the leaves. Maybe you draw closer for fruit, delicious and nourishing.

Leaves for healing. Fruit for feeding. If our Jesus-community together is like a tree, then the leaves are what others see of us. The fruit is what we give to bless them.

Leaves and fruit can symbolize our life for the world, for our neighbourhoods. All of this that Jesus loves. Our neighbours, whom Jesus tells us to love. Even our enemies; he loves them too.

Leaves and fruit can symbolize our mission *with* Christ. Not just *for* Jesus. *With* Jesus.

Remember what we're saying at the end of our worship times. *Wherever we go, God is already there.* We don't take Jesus anywhere. We learn to recognize what Jesus is already doing in those places, and hear his summons, "*Come and join in with me.*" We bring what he's given us: fruit for feeding, leaves for healing.

I'm just getting into this. Next Sunday, I'll offer ideas of what this might look like for our congregations. These are to you thinking and imaging better ideas. Where is feeding needed, and what fruit is God growing in us? Where is healing needed that fits with the sorts of leaves we have? Then in future weeks, I'll get into our trunk and branches, and our roots, and the whole forest that we're part of.

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In the arc of the Bible's great storyline, we can't push rewind. There is no going-back to Eden. Instead, God is bringing us forward, in God's promise, to the City.

Now, we don't need to be city-loving-folk to get this. It's a picture of the fullness of God's Presence. And of a river of ever-flowing blessing. And that Life Tree, with feeding fruit and healing leaves.

Even after the pandemic, I don't think we're going back to the way things were. I'm sad about that. Also, I'm curious and wondering. Because we'll be going ahead in God's promise. With God! Following Jesus. Our mission with him, our life for the world, our fruit and leaves . . . is basic to who we are, and who we will be together. (And so are our trunk and branches, our roots, and our whole forest.)

These are gifts he gives. We are one of Jesus' trees! Trees of his life. Amen.