

The Tree of Life

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Genesis 2:4b-9; Proverbs 3:13-18; Revelation 22:1-5

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

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Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!

The Christian faith, biblical faith, is a journey of transformation, from beginning to end. It is a journey of transformation from fear to courage, from death to life, from isolation to community, from cross to the empty tomb. Sam Wells, formerly the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University and one of my theological heroes, has said, "Christianity is fundamentally a story about *where we're going*: into the company of God's grace, in the harmony of the restored creation, through the mercy of God's incarnate love."¹

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We are on a journey; the Bible is one great drama of transformation, Easter is one great drama of transformation. There is *cosmic transformation*, in which the entire cosmos is turned upside down by the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. That is to say that God's transformation affects *all of us* together. And there is *personal transformation*, in which each individual person is touched, changed, healed, and renewed. Our God does not engage in one-size-fits-all conversions, in which people and animals and plants are all treated as some kind of bland collective. God relates to each one of us individually and personally. God's transformation affects all of us together, and it affects each one of us personally.

Likewise, the "tree of life," a theme in our three texts this morning that Ruth just read for us, is for the "*healing of the nations*," for all of us. And, Proverbs 3 teaches us that *each one* of us is invited to reach out, in our own individual lives, to lay hold of wisdom, who is a tree of life for each of us. Wisdom is a gift to us, but it also involves our own intentionality and effort, as we 'lay hold' of wisdom and pursue wisdom. The tree of life, that great symbol of biblical renewal and transformation, is public, involving the entire world, and it is personal, in which each one of us has a part that no one else can play.

Many of us are learning that the transformation of our lives, the healing of our lives, the public and the personal nature of biblical faith, includes not only how we relate to our human neighbors, whom Jesus commands us to love. The healing of our

¹ Samuel Wells, "Two Stories That Define Our World," *The Christian Century*, October 31, 2017. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/faith-matters/two-stories-define-our-world>, accessed April 18, 2020.

lives, the public and the personal nature of our faith, also includes animals and trees and plants and rivers and the air around us, the entirety of God's good creation. This growing awareness comes from and is grounded in our theology of stewardship. As the author and farmer Wendell Berry has written, "God made the world because He wanted it made. He thinks the world is good, and He loves it. It is His world; He has never relinquished title to it. And He has never revoked the conditions, bearing on His gift to us of the use of it, that oblige us to take excellent care of it."² There are no limits to God's love for the world, so there are no limits to whom we are called to love. In just a few moments, we will be singing as a doxology, "All creatures of our God and King, lift up your voice and let us sing."

This coming Wednesday, April 22, is the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, a day that was begun in 1970 as a day of learning about environmental issues. In November 2018, our Session here at Lewinsville voted to become an Earth Care congregation of the Presbyterian Church (USA), thanks especially to the leadership of Susan Bartram and Maia Foster. In choosing to do that, the Session indicated its commitment to caring for God's earth and to cultivating that care in our worship, our education, our facility, and in our outreach. Again, this practice of Earth Care has its deepest roots in our *theology of stewardship*, of taking care of that for which we have been given responsibility. It is the same theology that undergirds our parenting, that informs our relationship to money and time, that shapes our use of our gifts and talents. During Lent, Pastor Jen and her husband, Andrew Sharp, led a class on 'Christian Simplicity,' looking at how we use food, water, and energy resources, giving us an opportunity to consider how we relate to our 'stuff.' Christian Simplicity is about stewardship. Earth Care affirms that which is old and very traditional, in its desire to conserve the heritage of God's creation that we enjoy – the parks, the streams, the trails, clean air and water – and that we want to preserve for our grandchildren; and, Earth Care affirms that which is new and unfolding, in its openness to technologies and ways of doing things that are sustainable and renewable.

Last month, we reflected together on the way that the coronavirus pandemic coincided with the season of Lent. "The Lentiest Lent ever" some have called it. In the coming days, we may reflect on the ways that our experience of the pandemic, which we are collectively living through, will inform and shape our collective response to climate change. Both situations pose deep challenges to our society and world. Both situations affect all of us, although the burden of both situations falls most heavily on those who are poor and have limited resources. And, while both situations involve considerable disagreements about how best to respond, it is also the case that both situations call for a collective response.

Sometimes, the response to the coronavirus pandemic gets understood, in a binary way, as a choice between the need to re-open the economy and the need to preserve public health. Likewise, the response to climate change sometimes gets

² Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010) 98.

framed, in a binary way, as a choice between the need to preserve economic growth and the need to heal the climate. While there are real differences of opinion here, it seems to me to be an anxious breakdown of imagination for us to conclude that these are binary options, where only one side can prevail, and where the other side has nothing constructive to contribute. We are finding our way through the pandemic, and we will discover our way into and through the challenges of climate change. If we have the fortitude and the grace to hang in there in the midst of our differences, there may be a creativity that lives in the tension between the different perspectives. And congregations like Lewinsville – where one finds persons of deep differences who love each other, even as we disagree with each other – may have an important role to play in helping our society and our world (where deep differences are often not held with love) navigate these difficult challenges.

During this time of great loss with the pandemic, other great challenges in our world persist and continue. They haven't gone away, even while our attention is necessarily focused on the pandemic. But God's tree of life has also not gone away. According to our faith, it was there in the very beginning in Genesis. According to our faith, it will be there at the very end in Revelation, healing the nations and all that is broken within them. And according to our faith, it is here with us right now in Proverbs, available to us as wisdom for our lives – the wisdom of God, which is better than silver and gold, more precious than jewels, and nothing we desire can compare with it. People of faith will need to be intentional about pursuing this wisdom. Wisdom does not just come automatically or magically. We must be intentional about pursuing, and cultivating an openness to receiving wisdom's gifts. Wisdom can lead us as we respond to the pandemic, wisdom can lead us as we respond to climate change, and wisdom can lead us as we lead our daily lives. For that is where we are going: into the company of God's grace, in the harmony of the restored creation, through the mercy of God's incarnate love. To God and to God alone be all the glory.

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Amen.