

Sabbath: Tree of Life?
Genesis 2:4- 25
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Today we are continuing our sermon series on Sabbath... and I'm going to start off with an act of confession- Sabbath rest is a spiritual practice that I love the sound of... but am terrible at practicing. Prioritizing intentional spiritual rest sounds wonderful, but somehow never gets prioritized. Which is why when Jen and I started to put plans into place for our summer sermon series I got excited. My thought was that this would be a great way for me to dive in and wrestle a bit with my own blocks to making Sabbath rest a priority and hopefully make start practicing a weekly sabbath for myself... but in honest confession- you should all know that I wrote this sermon about Sabbath rest on my Sabbath It is what it is, the to do lists this week just got too long and of course when you set aside a whole day for rest, it gets easy to fill it up with the To Do list, so, the first step is identifying the problem. I'll keep you posted on how it goes. But I have a hunch that I am not the only person in this room that struggles with this spiritual practice, and so I invite you to join me in the wrestling attempt to figure out why we might have a block to this particular spiritual discipline. It sounds nice, but it almost feels overly indulgent- I'm excited for a summer to contemplate Sabbath, and to discover all the ways that God is calling us to meet God in the rest of Sabbath.

Last week Pastor Jen examined the role of Sabbath in the creation story told to us Genesis 1. Genesis chapter 1 is a beautiful poetic telling of creation in which God creates order out of Chaos, and on the last day rests. From Genesis chapter 1 we are set up to understand foundational truths about who God is in this world, and how we relate to that wondrous source of all life- God almighty.

Today we turn the page, and encounter a continuation of the creation story. Genesis chapter 2, some people refer to this story as the 2nd creation story, and that seems to be what is going on here. Genesis chapter 1 and Genesis chapter 2 tell two different stories of creation. If you read closely you will notice that there are a number of differences between the two creation narratives. The order of creation is different, the names used for God are different, and the way in which God interacts with creation is different.

This idea of having two different creation narratives can be confusing- and most biblical scholars would argue that the two different narratives are written by different authors. Which I agree with, but a rabbi whose podcast I listened to this week stated that because God is one and We are not, it is often hard for humanity to fully understand the totality of God, and therefore the two creation stories tell us two stories of creation from two perspectives of how God went about Creation. The two stories do not contradict one another, rather widen and our understanding of who God is. Genesis 1 shows God as doer- the transcendent all powerful creator God, and then Genesis chapter 2 show us God as be-er. The imminent present being God who is with us and present in the moment. Even the names used for God in these creation narratives connect to this idea. In 1 God is referred to as Elohim, which is translated as "the mighty one" or the "supreme one", and then in Genesis chapter 2 God is referred to as YHWH, God's name introduced to Moses at the burning bush. This name is derived from the word in Hebrew "to be" translating as God who was, is, and will be. The "being" God.

So today we are going to take a closer look at the second creation story and investigate if Sabbath rest is a part of this story as well. Genesis chapter 1 is clear and easy to see because God clearly takes a rest, but my hunch is that if we squint and read closely we will discover the essence of Sabbath rest in this other side of the coin creation story.

Genesis 2:8-9 and the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. 9 Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Immediately when reading this version of creation, you will notice that the setting of the story is different. Rather than the cosmic birds eye view of Genesis 1- we have an intimate setting. God has created a special garden and has placed a man to live and work the garden. The man's name is Adam- which in Hebrew means son of the ground. In this special garden God creates all kinds of trees that are meant to nourish and sustain the life of this newly formed human. The trees are both good for food and also beautiful to look at. Among all the trees God creates two special trees, the Tree of life that is in the middle of the Garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. As readers we are supposed to understand that these two special trees are also meant for the nourishment of the human in the garden. Later in Chapter 2 after God creates a partner (Eve) we hear this command in vs 16-17:

16 And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'

Spoiler alert: In Genesis 3 the humans eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil which results in their banishment from the Garden, and all sorts of theology has been deduced from that part of the story, specifically the doctrine of original sin. The ending of the story overshadows the beginning of the story, and because of that it is easy to forget about the Tree of Life.

But I want to take a moment and bring these two special trees from the Garden of Eden into focus. Some questions I have been sitting with this week. Why did God create these two Trees? What do trees have to do with knowledge and what does a tree have to do with Life. What might these trees have to do with one another? Why does God bar Adam and Eve from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. That doesn't really seem like a bad thing to have. These two trees are both important and mysterious.

Which led me to wonder if there might be clues elsewhere in scripture to understand the mysteries of these two trees, and in my search I discovered a couple of interesting connections. At the end of the Pentateuch, at the very end of Deuteronomy, Moses is giving a speech to the Israelites before they enter into the promise land. Moses is discussing the importance of the law that God revealed while the Israelites were in the wilderness, and in Deuteronomy chapter 30 vs 15 Moses states "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil", which interestingly connects to the two trees in our story today. It seems that the law of God revealed to Moses and the Israelites is related in some way to the two trees God created in the Garden of Eden. Then I found in the book of Proverbs chapter 3 vs. 18 Solomon describes the wisdom of God as "a tree of life to those who take hold of her, those who hold her fast will be blessed."

These trees that we encounter in our 2nd creation story are in fact not all that random, but are rather themes that we will see over and over again throughout the Bible. Following God's commands in relation to goodness and evil is an important part of living our faith, a moral code of how we live on earth together is a part of what it means to be in relationship with God. Also important to our faith is choosing life, connecting with the Spirit of God that is the source of all life and that which nourishes our souls.

The Tree of Life is God's Word and Spirit giving life to all that is in our world and universe. Because Genesis 2 gives us this personal "just being" version of creation, it allows us to take in the miracle that we are even able to have a relationship with God. Take a moment and sit with the idea that we, mere humans, earthly bodies, have the ability to connect to the immortal source of all life, it is a wild thing that we should be

able to do that. God is the creator of all that is, all mighty and all powerful, and yet, that very God knows us personally, is closer to each of us than our very own breath. The fact that God, the source of all life, speaks in words and actions that we can understand is a miracle in and of itself.

We can't hug, touch or see God, but we can "breathe" in God's spirit through the tree of life. Genesis vs 7 *then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground,* and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.* From this verse we understand that we are created from the ground. But we are not just created from the Ground; our souls are created by the breath (ruach) of God, and so to feed and nurture our souls we need to bask in the beauty and presence of the tree of life which modulates nutrition from God's spirit to humans. It is that which keeps our souls going. The tree is rooted in the heavens- and emits the source of life into our beings.

At the end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation the tree of life makes another appearance. In chapter 22 we are told in the authors vision that after the second coming of Jesus and in the City of God "On either side of the river is the 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." The tree of life is continuing to give nutrition and healing to all.

I believe that part of Sabbath rest is intentionally connecting with God through the Tree of Life, and there are many ways that we can connect with the Tree of Life:

1. Connection with the Beauty of God. When God creates the trees in the Garden we are told that the trees are for nourishment, but also so that they are beautiful. Finding Beauty in creation, in God's kingdom, in fellow humanity is important for the nourishment of life. If we are too busy with our to do lists, and not stopping to pay attention, we will miss the beauty of all that God is doing in our midst.
2. Allow ourselves to contemplate the mystery and miracle that is connection to God who is the creator of all that is.
3. Breathing... allowing ourselves to notice the mystery of our breath...
4. Connecting with the Biblical Story, and allowing this unique book to unleash our imagination and connect us deeper to God's work in the world
5. Community- connecting with our fellow creation.. We are not fully human on our own, we are fully human when we are in connection with our fellow humanity, and when we work together to connect with God's work in the world.

6. Connecting with the “being” God, the God who was, is, and will be a God that is not anxious about the next moment, but is present in the right now, who loves, and knows you, and is the source of the life running through you.

In just a few moments we are going to sing a classic hymn “In the Garden” and while we sing this song together imagine the garden you are singing about is the Garden Eden and imagine yourself connecting with the Tree of Life. Lyrics in the song

And He walks with me
And He talks with me
And He tells me I am His own
And the joy we share as we tarry there
None other has ever known

What stuck out to me is the phrase “As we tarry there”. To tarry means to stay, to delay, to rest in one place. Imagine yourself in the presence of God. You would want to Tarry, to stay as long as possible, to rest in the delight of that moment. May we all experience that sort of sabbath. A delightful, life giving, life nourishing moment that we Tarry in rest. Amen.