

CONSTRUING THE CROSS: THE TREE

Genesis 2:8-9, 15-17
Deuteronomy 21:22-23
Revelation 2:7
Revelation 22:1-2

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on the Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 31, 2019, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a Lenten series entitled “Construing the Cross.”

Genesis 2:8-9, 15-17

And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. 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 Life¹ also in the midst of the garden, and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 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.’

Deuteronomy 21:22-23a

When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse. You must not defile the land that the Lord your God is giving you for possession.

Revelation 2:7

Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the Tree of Life that is in the paradise of God.

Revelation 22:1-2

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. 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.

We come now to sermon four of five in a Lenten series entitled “Construing the Cross.”² Through these sermons we are looking at *different* but *complementary* ways the Christian faith interprets the death of Christ on the cross: sacrifice, scapegoating, deliverance, tree and serpent. All these ways I hope prepare us to celebrate even more hopefully that day on which we will sing “Christ the Lord is Risen Today.”

Let us pray: *Of the cross, Julian of Norwich wrote: ‘The human mother may put her child tenderly to her breast, but our tender Mother Jesus simply leads us into his blessed breast through his open side, and there gives us a glimpse of the Godhead and our heavenly joy.’ Lord, every time I have the audacity to stand in this pulpit, all I ask is that through my human words, you would ‘give us a glimpse of the Godhead and our heavenly joy.’” In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

¹ Throughout this sermon and scripture readings, I have capitalized Tree of Life, even though it rarely appears that way in the books and manuscripts I am using or the Biblical texts to which I am referring. I have done likewise for the Tree of Knowledge.

² The series grows out of a book: Frances M. Young, *Construing the Cross* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015).

I.

We never go through Lent without either hearing or singing:

*Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?
Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?
O! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?*

As far back as the Book of Deuteronomy, when Moses reissues for the Israelites the Law to prepare them to enter the Promised Land, the people of Israel have associated the tree with shameful death. Moses said:

*When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death...
And you hang him on a tree...
You shall bury him that same day,
For anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse.*

After the death and resurrection of Christ, as Christianity spread throughout the Greco-Roman world, the Greek word *xylon*, which means “timber,” was used as a translation of Hebrew words referring to execution by hanging.³ It was used as well as to describe the crucifixion of Christ.⁴

A few decades later, in the early writings of the church, theologians and preachers saw connections between Old Testament “timber” and the New Testament cross:

- God appearing to Abraham by the “oaks” of Mamre⁵
- Isaac carrying *wood* to his near sacrifice,⁶ just as Christ would later carry his own cross⁷
- Moses’ *staff* parting the waters of the Red Sea⁸ and turning the bitter waters of Marah sweet⁹
- Aaron’s *rod* blossoming¹⁰
- God comforting David – and generations hence – with his “*rod and staff*”¹¹
- And the “*shoot*” promised to “come out from the stump of Jesse,” and “a branch” promised to “grow out of his roots,” on which “the spirit of the Lord shall rest,” bringing “wisdom and understanding,”

³ Genesis 40:19; Joshua 8:29; Joshua 10:26.

⁴ Acts 5:30; Acts 10:39; I Peter 2:24.

⁵ Genesis 18:1.

⁶ Genesis 22:6.

⁷ John 19:7, compared to Matthew to Matthew 27:32, Mark 15:21, and Luke 23:26 where Simon of Cyrene is compelled to carry Jesus’ cross.

⁸ Exodus 14:16.

⁹ Exodus 17:1-8.

¹⁰ Numbers 17:1-13,

¹¹ Psalm 23.

“counsel and might,” “knowledge and the fear of the Lord,” and leading “the wolf” to “live with the lamb,” “the leopard” to “lie down with the kid,” “the calf and the lion and the fatling together.”¹²

In the Old and New Testaments, and in Christian theology that followed, *tree* and *cross*, timber and *Calvary*, *wood* and *crucifixion* go hand in hand.

Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?

II.

Anytime we are dealing with the *cross* of Christ – apart from antiseptic depictions that might appear in an online website or a Nieman Marcus catalogue – we are dealing with matters most heavy and violent.

One of the most significant books written in American theology the past few years has been the late Dr. James Cone’s *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.¹³ As you might imagine, it draws a parallel at the deep level of human suffering between African Americans *lynched* in our country much more recently than we like to admit and Christ *crucified* on the cross. Cone says:

The Cross and the Lynching Tree is my latest witness to “the blood dripping down through the leaves,”¹⁴ pain so old and deep and black and particular.

By far [he continues] *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* is the most agonizing book I have written. I had nightmares during the ten years I was writing it. I realize that I could have been that “strange fruit” that Billie Holiday sang about...My father and mother and even my brothers could have been “black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze.”¹⁵

On October 27, 2018, eleven people were killed and seven injured in a mass shooting in a Conservative Synagogue in Pittsburgh. Someone I know from Capitol Hill is from Pittsburgh, and I had the feeling she may have grown up in that synagogue. I emailed her, and she responded:

I was married in that synagogue. My mother attends every Saturday. She would have been there today except she was at the campaign office stuffing envelopes. She has friends who died.

Do you remember the name of the synagogue? In Hebrew – *L’Simcha – Tree of Life*.

The tree and the cross.

Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?

¹² Isaiah 11:1-3, 6.

¹³ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).

¹⁴ Billie Holiday, “Strange Fruit,” available at

https://www.google.com/search?hl=en&authuser=0&rlz=1C1GCEU_enUS838US838&ei=Y22fXNeJHNPC-gTu25awDQ&q=billie+holiday+strange+fruit+lyrics&oq=billie+&gs_l=psy-ab.1.0.35i39j0i131j0i6712j0i13116.2483.3458..5758...0.0..0.98.501.7.....0....1..gws-wiz.....0i71j0.4464WXJzYcM.

¹⁵ James H. Cone, “The Cross and the Lynching Tree,” lecture at Union Theological Seminary, New York, New York, published March 18, 2016, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nryz_SNGPuI.

III.

Early on, within Jewish tradition, the idea developed that suffering can be redemptive. “By his stripes we are healed,”¹⁶ says Isaiah of the Suffering Servant.

Within Christianity, two seemingly opposite ways developed that associate the cross as tree, the tree as cross, and are considered redemptive.

(a)

One is a way with which we are familiar. In this way, as you may recall:

- There are two trees planted by God in the Garden of Eden at Creation: The tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the Tree of Life.
- God specifically forbids the man and woman from eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, but allows these first human beings access to all other trees of the Garden, including the Tree of Life, the only other tree God specifically names.
- As you may know, the man and woman both eat of the fruit of the tree which has been forbidden them to eat. They are expelled from the Garden, and the story of God’s attempt to redeem the human race from this – the Fall – begins almost immediately¹⁷ and occupies the remainder of the Bible – Genesis through Revelation.
- Interestingly enough, the Tree of Life, makes only a few appearances¹⁸ in the remainder of the Bible, not re-surfacing fully until the end in the Book of Revelation.

When the Tree of Life resurfaces, it is at the place where Paradise – the Holy City, the new heaven and new earth – are described and promised. In Paradise, the Tree of Life is available to those who are faithful: to those who have obeyed the way and will of God. “To everyone who conquers [says God], I will give permission to eat from the Tree of Life that is in the paradise of God.” Having gone underground after the Fall in Genesis, the Tree of Life thus resurfaces as *reward* for the faithful on that day when Christ will return to redeem fully the created order.

We are familiar with this way of thinking. If we are good, righteous, faithful, we will be rewarded, we believe, if not in this life at least in the life to come. The Tree of Life as *reward*.

(b)

But the Tree of Life resurfaces at another place within the closing chapters of Revelation as well. It resurfaces less as a *reward* for obedience than as an overwhelming expression of God’s *grace* – a cosmic tree in which God *encompasses and brings into his very being* all of creation. Listen again to Revelation 22:1-2:

¹⁶ Isaiah 53:5.

¹⁷ The formal redemption begins at Genesis 12, with the call of Abraham and Sarah.

¹⁸ Proverbs 3:18, 11:30, 13:12, and 15:4.

The angel showed me
The river of the water of life,
Bright as crystal,
Flowing from the throne of God
And of the Lamb
Through the middle of the street of the city.

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*.

In this vision, the Tree of Life is well beyond the normal and earthly, the graspable and understandable, the earnable and rewardable. Rather:

- The tree is vast and cosmic
- It sits on both sides of the river
- It sits at the center of the world
- It covers the whole earth
- It encompasses within itself all of creation
- And through it God pervades the whole of creation: length, breadth, height, and depth.

In addition, in this appearance of the Tree of Life, it draws from the dispersed of the earth people from all nations, drawing them into the very being of God.

A first century preacher Hippolytus gives voice to this cosmic tree:

The tree of heavenly dimensions has raised itself from earth to heaven, fixing itself an eternal plant, between heaven and earth, to

- uphold the universe
- support all things
- mainstay of the world
- prop up the whole inhabited earth.

Hippolytus calls the Tree of Life the “joint of the terrestrial globe, holding together the variety of human nature, and nailed by the invisible bolts of the spirit, that being fixed to the divine, it may never more be sundered from it.”

“Touch[ing] with its crown the summit of heaven, making firm the earth with its feet, and embracing on every side in its mighty arms the many spirits of the air between heaven and earth, [the Tree of Life] was wholly *in all things and in every place*.¹⁹

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¹⁹ Quoted in Young 56.

I once knew a tough but sensitive man in his forties who told me that the hardest day of his childhood was when he came home from school and a crew of workers were taking down the giant oak tree near the driveway in front of the home on several acres in which he and his family lived. “My whole life was that tree,” he said. “I lived in it. I climbed it. I played in it. I built a tree house in it. I hoisted my dog up in it. My whole world was that tree.”

IV.

My friends, perhaps a deep and new understanding of the cross of Christ can be that of the cross as Tree of Life.

- The cross as tree does *more than reward* us for obedience.
- The cross as tree is cosmic in nature, encompassing all of creation.
- It rests on both sides of the river.
- The cross as tree is that in which “we live and move and have our being.”
- It links the earth on which our feet trod and our hands perform their daily tasks with the heaven from which we have been sent as gift and to which we trust and aspire to return.
- The cross as tree holds together all nations of the world in a unity we cannot attain on our own.²⁰

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More than anything else, the cross as Tree of Life is *hope*.

Of *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James Cone says:

[The book] is my *invocation* to God on behalf of black people in the hopes that their nearly four hundred years of suffering will be redemptive for their children and grandchildren revealing to them the *beauty* in their tragic past.

Frances Young, whose book has given rise to this series, writes:

As Tree of Life, the cross...is the fruition of God’s creative intentions, generating new life out of death.²¹

Perhaps tree and cross are all in all, bringing us into the whole of God’s goodness, the whole of God’s creation, the whole of God’s redemptive grace:

*Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?
Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.*

Amen.

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²⁰ Young 55-56.

²¹ Young 71.