

Sermon for Easter Sunday - April 4, 2021

Genesis 2:8 *And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹ And out of the ground, the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*

There were two trees planted in the Garden. We know for sure that the Tree of Life was set square in the center of the garden. The text doesn't tell us where the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was placed, although it seems to be in some proximity to the Tree of Life. Perhaps they both stood center, but then why not say so with greater clarity? It's an oddly constructed sentence for all that.

The Tree of Life was in the middle of the garden and (so too) the tree of Knowledge? Or maybe, The Tree of Life was planted in the center of the garden and the Tree of Knowledge was also planted in the garden (somewhere)... It's vague, I guess.

They must be close by each other, in some respect, because Eve misidentifies it for the Tree of Life. She answers Satan, by saying, "We must not eat of the tree that is in the midst of the Garden, we must not even touch it, or we shall surely die."

Clearly, she means the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Yet she identifies it as the tree within the midst of the Garden, which is where we are told, the Tree of Life was planted. Eve seems confused on the matter. But let us remember that even if Eve is confused on this point, Adam is not. And since he is standing beside her the entire time, with his big mouth clamped shut, he will get the full blame for what follows.

Genesis 3:22 *Then the Lord God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—" ²³ therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴ He drove out the man, and at the east of the Garden of Eden, he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.*

We remember the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But I think we tend to forget about the Tree of Life. God spared us from eating from that tree and living forever in our sins, or rather living forever in our sinful condition.

Imagine what that would be... Always growing older, and frailer. Add into that image, the complications of sickness and disease. But no matter how sick or decrepit you might

become, being unable to die. God saw it as a mercy to keep us from that fate, and allow us the release of death.

He observed that human nature, even before the fall, was prone to weakness and able to be tempted by the promise of equality with God, even when threatened with the probability of death. Still he would reach out and eat of it.

How now, after the fall, could human beings resist the temptation to eat from the Tree of Life? Attempting to avoid the penalty of death and live forever? Surely they would give in, and eat, and so they would suffer a living death. I can't help but point out how that idea of becoming one of the living dead is so foundational in our stories of horror and the macabre. It is good that God in his mercy said no. And even to allow death to enter the world... knowing what this would ultimately mean for himself.

For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son to suffer and die, so that all those who believe in Him would not perish forever in their sins, but live an eternal life set free from the penalty of death. And that brings us to EASTER, and the Resurrection to LIFE.

Why plant the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil to begin with? That's a good question, and it deserves a good answer. Why not simply create a people without the desire to say no. A people who would not be tempted by sin, because they would always obey. Why create Lucifer, with a free will, knowing what Lucifer would do? Why create a scenario with the potential for your people to reject you? Why put your creation through suffering, and why suffer yourself, because God would have to suffer, in order to redeem his people.

As I read the word of God, I have reached a conclusion on the matter that seems to agree with the teaching of the Apostles. And that conclusion is that God appears to value two things very highly.

(1) Our God is a God of Love. And this is perhaps the primary attribute of who our God is.

(2) The other attribute that seems highly valued by our God is Freedom.

He would not see us enslaved to anything. Not to death or sin or the devil. But oddly, also not even to Himself. And what I see is a God who is willing to risk our rebellion and our rejection, in order to give us the FREEDOM to say, "I love You too." And mean it, from the core of who we are. To say it FREELY and not under compulsion, threat, or programming.

To say "I love you" because we actually do love Him. And not because we don't have the option to say "no". Because IF we are not truly able to say "NO," then we are not truly able to say "yes" either.

God did not create evil. What God did was to create choice. The resulting choice would bring with it evil. Bring sin, death and the devil. But God is not thwarted by evil. God, being God, can solve the problem created by choosing rebellion. Freedom is WORTH the RISK. Being given the freedom to choose what we would do and how we would live. Even... if that choice resulted in sin entering the world... For God I think it was worth the risk, worth the consequence, in order to hear us say, "I love you too" and really mean it.

It's a version of that old saying, that "If you love something, set it free, let it go. If it comes back to you, it's yours. If not, it was never meant to be."

Of course, "never meant to be" implies something like FATE. The idea that there is an "intended" way for things to be, governed by a divine plan. And in fact, there IS something very much like that. In other words, this is another way of saying that you can't force someone to love you.

As if God has said to us, I am God. I am good and Holy. Apart from Me, nothing is good or holy. You can choose to walk away from Me, but what you will find is not good. What you encounter will not be holy. You were intended for something better. In Me you will find joy and purpose. Apart from Me, you will not.

But the reality of letting someone else go, to give them the freedom to seek their own happiness, goes against pretty much every instinct we have as humans. Which is another reason for me to get on board with the idea.

Remember when evangelical Christians were big on asking the question. "What Would Jesus Do? (WWJD)" You don't hear that one much these days because, well... people usually got it wrong. It seems that God's way of doing things is often just the opposite of the way we typically think that God would or should behave.

You want to know what Jesus would do? Well, open up His Word. It's all right there in black and white. And sometimes red.

And what He did for us was to become one of us. And suffer this world's rebellion, pain and injustice. Even the wrath of God. And remove from us the stain of sin, and the

penalty for our self-centeredness and rejection, so that whosoever should believe in Him, has the benefit of what he did. Including his resurrection from the dead. Amen.