

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Soil, Garden, and Trees

Genesis 1-2

June 7, 2020

When we're young, we learn that to pray is to close your eyes and block out the world around you to focus on God. Another way to pray is to keep your eyes wide open, to pay careful attention to all that is around you. This, too, is prayer. When you pay attention, you see where God is present all around you and where God is working inside you to bring transformation. As we rejoin one another in worship, let us pay attention with penetrating vision to soil beneath our feet, to the garden in which we worship, to the trees which tower over us, to the moment in history unfolding around us in person and on line, not just in pandemic which separated us from one another, but in the movement pulling us all together.

Before that though, a lament for what we've left behind. Baptists always go around insisting 'the church is not a building, the church is not a building, the church is the people.' And that's true. The church is the people. But a church building is more than a warehouse for those people to meet in. The walls, floors, and ceiling of the sanctuary are seasoned with prayer and tears, with songs and laughter of the people who meet there. Church buildings are special places of peace, rich in history, and prayer. They are holy. Church buildings ought not be burnt by violence, and they ought not be used as a prop. They are holy.

We love this church, not just all it represents, but we actually love this building. When my childhood pastor Cecil Sherman arrived at the church of my first pastorate in Hickory Rock, NC, he looked over the church's white steeple, bright red brick, the flowers in the garden, the freshly mowed grass. He said, "These people love this place." He was right. Lots of people loved that place.

I'm sorry he couldn't join me here before he died. I would have loved to show him this place too. He would have said, "These people love this place." He would be right. Several years ago, two brothers from the Taizé community in France came to Waco and led prayers at DaySpring each night for a week. When Brother Emmanuel walked up to the sanctuary, he paused and said, "This reminds me of Taizé. I feel the God's Spirit here."

From time to time over the years, we gather folks new to DaySpring to talk about the church and church membership. I like to ask, "What is your impression of DaySpring?" After all those times of asking, I'm still waiting to hear: "Oh, Pastor the sermons are the very best thing. I hang on every word." But what I hear over and over is "The windows. The natural light. I love the simplicity of the sanctuary, stone and wood, and looking outside at the trees while we worship." Well, friends, you like that so much, here you go, stone and wood and natural light. If you'd just said "Oh, Pastor, I love the sermon so much," you might be sitting in the air conditioning right now!

But here we are. Outside among the stone and soil, light and breeze, trees and bushes. Here we gather in this cathedral of the oaks. We do it not because we wanted to leave behind our

sanctuary but because the choice was pressed upon us by the pandemic. It was pressed upon us by love. We don't meet in there for a while because our love for the church as people is even greater than our love for the church as building. Let it be said, not just "these people love this place," but also "These people love one another and their neighbor."

And so, we are here, outside. It's not so bad. Indeed, it is good. It is very good. Just as the creator declared. It is good: soil, garden, and trees.

Soil. If at any point you feel the urge to reach down and take dirt in your hand as you pray, you're connecting with the root of your being and the gift of your life and your connection with all good things God has brought to life. Being outside reminds us we are creatures among the rest of creation. We're not so separated from the rest of creation or from other creatures. We're back in the world and a small part of us knows that is good and life giving. Not just a small part of us, the essence of who we are as creatures. In the opening chapters of Genesis, the relationship between God and everything else is made clear. God is Creator, everything else is creation. Everything that exists by the creative power and outflowing grace of God. I say grace because creation is a free gift. Life is a literally a gift freely given to all things. And we believe all things then are sacramental: all things are signs that bear the mark of their Creator. One of the illusions of the modern world is the idea that reality is divided up between the material realm and the spiritual realm, but we believe that all creation, knit together in Christ, is the theater of grace.

When God creates in Genesis 1, God creates three arenas: the sky, the sea, and the land. Of the three, the land is most important. The land will participate as co-creator in the bringing forth of life on earth: commanded to bear fruit and grow grass and trees and every living thing. And God saw that it was good. In Genesis 2, dirt is scooped up into God's hand and formed into human being. The name of the dirt in Hebrew is *adamah*. The name of the human in Hebrew is *Adam*. Have you made that connection before? Our connection with the dirt, the soil, the land is the essence of our creatureliness. God forms humans from the land and breathes life into him. The connection between land and human and God's breath is at the heart of creation. And God said it is good. Being outside in the dirt reminds us and reconnects us as creatures with creation by the hand of our creator.

Soil and Garden. Being outside here for worship reminds us of the intimacy of God's presence, an intimacy we first knew in the Garden of Eden. Out here, we are a little less industrialized—a little less insulated from the world: there's no AC out here if it's hot. When we're outside we peel off at least one layer of the bubble wrap that we operate in most of the time. When we worship in a garden, we return to where humans learned to worship. Adam and Eve in the lush, verdant garden of Eden walked with God in the cool of the evening. The first prayer of humans was a walk in the garden with God talking about the day. I've always felt an intimacy with God in nature. I say, 'always'. Perhaps not always. But often, and meaningfully. When you're outside in a beautiful place it's like time warps, it slows down, or really ceases to matter for a while. That sounds a lot like what Sabbath is supposed to be—a day when time shifts, it slows down. When we reconnect with who we are—the essence of who we are. No wonder sabbath practices in the Old Testament are so thoroughly connected with land and work. Sabbath . .

.worship . . .rest . . .it is new creation. We become a new creation in the garden in prayer. Let us remember, too, the garden was where bewildered disciples first met the risen Lord.

Near Colorado Springs, there is an amazing outcropping of huge stones, massive, unusual red rocks carving up the landscape into the sky. It's called the Garden of the Gods. But the Garden of God wasn't designed to overwhelm or impress; it was made to nurture and to sustain. Not a site to visit and gawk at; but a place to live and walk and know intimately and to be renewed morning by morning in God's own image. The image of the garden in scripture is of a whole world that is a temple for God to dwell in with God's creatures. As Churches are holy temples not to be desecrated or taken in vain, the world, too, is like a holy temple not to be desecrated or used and abused in vain. In the garden in worship, we take one small step back into the temple of God's world.

Soil, Garden, Trees. We are here in the dirt, in the garden, and amongst the trees. The trees are what drew us out here. Being here in the shadow of these magnificent trees reminds us of the goodness of God and our life in God and the frailty with which we inhabit the gift of life in God. We are indeed surrounded out here by some beautiful trees. Texans, in particular, have a soft spot for live oaks. We just assume the tree of life in Genesis was a live oak. If so, it might have looked something like one of these here. In Scripture, the tree in the center of the garden isn't divine, but it is the continuing source of divinely given life. In the center of the garden of God is the Tree of Life.

This tree behind me, I want to tell you something about this tree. It's been here for a while. This land we're on is graciously made available to DaySpring by a long-time member and friend who still owns the acres surrounding our property, property that he donated to the church years ago. For years as partners we have cared for this land and this grove of trees. Several years ago, you couldn't have worshipped under these trees. You could hardly walk through here. The Ligustrum had grown up under these trees, almost impenetrable tangled mass of undergrowth. But a group of DaySpringers were paying attention. They said, if we could clear out from under those trees, you'd see something beautiful, and it would help the trees be healthier. They went to work, chopping little trees and digging up stumps. Slowly, this grove reemerged. It's like these trees were smiling. They could drink freely again; they could spread out again. They could live as they were made to live. Were that true for all God's creatures.

This land wasn't always our of course. Before our presence here, this whole area was the working farm of the Methodist Children's Home. A big red barn sat right about where the sanctuary sits now. Old Wacoans remember the day they saw smoke rise from this side of town on the day the barn burned. Remnants of that era are here and there around us. That's the era of the water pump house and the water tower. There're also a few hidden reminders back in the woods that probably our children have explored more than most of us. I don't know much of the history prior to that Farm. Likely this was a heavily wooded area. And very likely native Americans roamed around this hillside and rested under these trees. I made a calculation of this tree behind me. According to the formula I found to estimate the age of a live oak tree by measuring its circumference and calculating its diameter, and you work a formula. By that formula, this tree is 273 years old. An acorn buried in the soil and began to sprout around 1747. 1747! This tree is older than our city, our state, our nation.

What has this tree seen? When this tree started growing, the 500-year long era called the Little Ice Age was ending and glaciers began slowly retreating. And now it lives in an era of accelerating climate change. We'll see if it can adapt. We hope it can. Trees are literally givers of life. Trees and humans are bound together. Humans breathe in oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide—that's how we're made. Trees are made to take carbon dioxide from the air and release back oxygen. We are made to live together. We and the trees breathe in and out together. We need one another. If it weren't for trees, we wouldn't be able to breathe.

In 1747, when this tree started growing Bach and Handel were dying, but Mozart would soon be born. Remember that when you start to lose hope for future generations. When this tree began growing, the Alamo was 30 years old as an outpost of the Spanish colonizers in San Antonio. In this area, the Huaco and Wichita Indians lived. Likely they'd never met anyone from Europe or anywhere else.

When this tree started growing, patriots in the colonies back east were declaring 'give me liberty or give me death' while ships stuffed with Africans were rolling over the waves of the Atlantic Ocean to be delivered to markets where some of those same patriots would buy and sell them. We've learned that to pay attention and to tell the story of history, we have to tell all that the trees have seen, the good and the evil.

This tree has stood vigil over a lot of human and ecological history in its long life. It now stands at the center of our worshipping life . . . this one and her sisters: pillars of our garden cathedral.

Trees stand for life for us.
And trees stand in judgment over us.

There were two trees in the Garden of Eden. One is the way of life; one the way of death. And so, here, as we worship under these trees, we worship in the grace of the shade that gives life, and in the shadow of the brokenness of our world which has led to death. Even this is a grace if we pay attention, a grace that judges us with righteousness that we may know our sinful, broken ways and may repent, seek forgiveness, and walk in the way of God. As churches are holy not to be desecrated or wrongly used, as the world is holy not to be desecrated or abused, human bodies are not to be desecrated or trampled.

Yet, they are.

We worship today in the shadow of the recent deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Abrey, and Breonna Taylor. The utterly shameful injustice of each of their deaths may seem far away to us. You didn't choke the life from Floyd in Minneapolis; you didn't hunt down Abrey through the streets of Brunswick, GA; you didn't break into Taylor's house in Louisville and shoot her in her sleep. And maybe you weren't guilty of looking the other way or covering it up. But then, none of that is hardly the point. The dark shadows that lay across their lives and their deaths are long and they lay over our city and our hearts as well. Jesse Washington's death a century ago in Waco was from the thick, low branches of a tree much like this one, and it was the product of a society that has changed much since then but still must change. Their deaths are the tragic fruit

of a society in the shadow of the tree of our sins, our hates, our racism, our deafness to the voices of our brothers and sisters, fellow children of God, made from out of the same soil, crying out for mercy and justice. We worship under a tree today whose bitter fruit we are tasting right now.

Over and over again these past two weeks, I have heard from Black friends, classmates, and professors, saying, "I deal with racism every, single day. Every, single day I have to deal with being black in America." My African-American classmate said this week, "When you all are tired of hearing about this, you can turn off your tv or your social media; I can never turn it off. Every single day." Another one said, "I want the looting and violent protests to stop, just like you do. It needs to stop. One good thing in all of this is that we are very encouraged at the diversity we see at rallies and in general. There have always been a few white folks at civil rights rallies even in the 1960s, but this seems different now. It feels like we're all in this together: Black, White, Asian, Hispanic. And that's good. Because for us the cry for justice has never been Black vs. White. It's been everyone who will join the side of justice against the dark forces of injustice and hatred that run in our society and through the lives of each of us as sinful individuals. We must search our hearts. We must repent. We must change."

A fellow African American Pastor, locally, writes with raw emotion with one of you who shared with me. I asked him this morning if I could share his words, and he gave his permission and thanked me for doing so. I said your words are more important than mine.

My heart hurts for several reasons, I'm reminded of the years, no centuries where Black and Brown folks have been beaten and killed at the hands of racist individuals and there was no video footage to capture it. I'm reminded of how hard it is to live as a Black man in this country. I have spent most of my adult life defending this great nation, I pay taxes, and obey all the laws of the land. However, I'm aware that this country doesn't respect me or people that look like me.

Over the past weeks, I've been on a roller coaster of emotions. Not only have I walked with members, friends, and colleagues, as they process the latest killings, I've had to process my own. Sadness, angry, frustration, hopelessness are the many waters I and others try to navigate. The overwhelming question I continue to get, "Why does White America hate us so much?" To that I have no answer, only tears.

God has pressed on my heart the ministry of racial reconciliation. Our church...is becoming a multiracial church, with God's blessing. How can you help? We have to form a partnership and develop true fellowship and build relationships, in order to have hard and difficult conversations. How would that look in the midst of Corona Virus, I'm not sure. We know, all Whites are not racist, or all cops are bad. However, the silence of the good and Christians is bewildering.

We must pay attention. With our eyes open to all that needs change—around us and within us. If there's anything we've learned in the last few months, we can. We can change in ways we didn't know we needed when we weren't paying attention. And we must.

By God's grace it begins here...now.

Return to the soil recreates us as creatures of God living new life in Christ.

Return to the garden reshapes us as worshippers walking intimately with the Holy One who walks amongst us.

Return to the trees renews us through righteous judgment and merciful grace.

May the death of all that is in us that is not of God free us that Christ-in-us may live abundantly.

Years ago, an oak seed was planted in this soil, in this garden. Look what she has become.

Today, a new gospel seed is planted. May God give it life.

The days ahead will have their challenges, but you are planted in the rich, deep soil of the gospel, which is still the good news of Jesus Christ, and in him, you are being redeemed.

We offer all of this together as a prayer. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God in whose image we are created, one God . . . our hope, our hope, our hope, our only hope.

Amen.

Copyright by Eric Howell, 2020