

Sermon:  
“Tree of Death/Tree of Life”

© Kate Heichler; Preached at Christ Church La Plata  
Good Friday, Year C, Friday, April 15, 2022

We’ve talked a lot about trees this Lent.  
Trees had so much to say during Lent about growth and spiritual life,  
and they haven’t stopped talking to me yet.

I think of trees as a universal symbol of goodness and happiness and life and joy –  
they are overwhelmingly positive for me.

But a few weeks ago I was listening to a podcast with an ornithologist,  
Drew Lanham, who is Black.

He was talking about the different reactions people might have to nature –  
he said, “If your ancestors were hung in trees, you might not be quick to  
want to go into the forest.” Many of the over 6,500 people lynched in America  
between 1865 and 1950 were hung in trees.

It stopped me in my tracks. I thought, I only have good associations with trees.

But I don’t have an ancestor who was hung on a tree.

I have ancestors who endured the Holocaust, and probably before them  
some who suffered under Russian pogroms in Eastern Europe...

But no one hung on a tree.

But then, I thought, going all the way back,

I do have an ancestor who was hung on a tree.

I don’t in any way want to minimize the horror of lynching or the brutality  
that continues to be directed toward people of color in this country.

Yet I do want to name that Jesus too was lynched.

It was a judicially approved lynching, as were many in our country,  
but that’s what it was.

And a tree felled and stripped bare of its branches bore the full weight of  
our Lord Jesus, as he slowly suffocated and died,  
just as he bore the full weight of the consequences of human sin and brutality.

Every Good Friday we ask,

“Just what exactly happened there, and how could it have been good for me?”

The questions pile up: Did God die? Did God kill his own Son? How could the  
death of Jesus of Nazareth have an impact beyond that miserable day?

All our questions run smack up against the mysteries of God.

I don't think God died, or killed Jesus. God was not the reason Jesus died,  
though Jesus used the language of "my father's will."  
God allowed Jesus to die at the hands of the very human beings  
he was there to save. It was human brutality that killed Jesus,  
human pride and lust for power and vengeance,  
human allegiance to the ways of this world and rejection of the ways of God.  
Ironically, it is the same instincts that have led humans to destroy trees  
and the wonders of this creation God made for us,  
to lead us to the brink of an uninhabitable planet.  
It is those same instincts that led to the naked aggression and brutality we are  
witnessing in the Ukraine, that same timidity to stand with the oppressed.  
We have not evolved very far since that first Good Friday –  
did Jesus accomplish anything?  
That's what "It is finished" means – "It is accomplished."

If we only look at the darkness, we'd be tempted to wonder.  
If we only live a Good Friday life we will see only  
defeat and disappointment, degradation and despair.  
But friends, we are not called to a Good Friday life. We are called to an Easter life.  
In our Easter life, we celebrate the incredible courage and generosity that we are  
also witnessing in the Ukraine crisis; we work to mitigate the damage done  
to our natural world; we stand for racial justice and equity.  
We can't help the Good Friday reality; but we are also called into new life.

Tonight and tomorrow are the days that most reflect where we live  
as people of faith who yet live on this side of glory.  
We Easter people in a Good Friday world.  
Use this next 24 hours to invite God into your sorrow and perplexity,  
even rage at the injustices that continue to flare.  
Rest with Jesus in that ultimate Sabbath that broke God's realm open for us.  
Ask the Spirit where God wants you to break out as an Easter person.

I've told you before about the little branch I picked up one day...  
I had been at a retreat where we had to find objects from nature  
and see how they spoke to us of God.  
And I grabbed this little branch that was broken on both ends, about a foot long.  
And it spoke volumes to me about God:  
it was broken, but I could not break it further.

It was creation. It was the wood of the cross.  
It was mystery covered in bark – I couldn't see its insides, only the outside.  
It had two little nubs on it that looked like once buds had been there.

Well, after the retreat I got it in my head to put this thing in water and see if those nubs would generate leaves. My rector begged me not to – he thought I was going to be disappointed and lose my faith, because this branch was pretty dead! But I stuck it in a plastic water glass on my desk.

And after a few weeks, a tiny bit of green appeared on one of the nubs. And then the nubs got bigger, and greener. And then a little tiny bit of a leaf appeared on one. In about three weeks, there were two clumps of leaves on that dead little branch, cut off as it was from its tree, dead as it had been. And I still think God did that to remind me that new life comes out of dead things. This was in the year after my sister had died, after a very difficult and sad life. I think I needed reminding. That branch spoke of God, and kept on speaking.

Things may not look so different 2000 years into this Jesus movement...  
Yet we know, because we have seen and proclaim that love continues to break through death. Love was born on that tree of death,  
a little nub of green that could not be killed.  
Just watch it come into full leaf!

Amen.