Tree of Life: Creation

On the day you voted on a new church name, Alan Buchta said to me right after the vote, “You should preach on what our new name means.” I thought that was a good idea, since I myself only knew a little. Name and identity are closely connected, and our name will to some extent shape who we are and how other people see us. Sometimes you make a decision without fully understanding the implications of that decision. When you chose Tree of Life Church for our new name, you may have done more than you realized. You talked about liking its sense of vitality and life and the commitment to diversity it represented. You liked the image of the growing, fruit bearing tree. Some of you even went out and researched its biblical roots – if you pardon the pun. But as I began to do my own research, I discovered there is more to the tree of life than any of us had taken into account. It turns out the tree of life is one of the deep symbols of human life and faith. It appears in one form or another in most of the world’s great religions and smaller mythological traditions. It is the primary image of the Jewish kabbalah, the mystic branch of Judaism, where it represents the process by which all of creation came into being.

The Tree of Life has meaning in the world of science as well. Since Darwin, the tree of life has been a metaphor, model and research tool used to illustrate the connectedness of living things. Darwin wrote, “The affinities of all the beings of the same class have sometimes been represented by a great tree…as buds give rise by growth to frest bud, and these if vigorous branch out and overtop on all sides may a feebler branch, so by generation I believe it has been with the great Tree of Life, which fills with its dead and broken branches the crust of the earth, and covers the surface with its ever branching and beautiful ramifications.” Darwin and Ernst Haeckel both sketched the first outlines of this biological tree of life and modern biologists still use it as a metaphor and a tool to understand how all things are related.

This is the larger context within which our new church name is found. But we are a Christian church, and it primarily within the Christian context that we seek the meaning of the tree of life. There’s still a lot there, layer upon layer of meaning and understanding, so for the next month we’ll be unpacking that meaning in our worship.

The story begins in a garden. Genesis 1 lays out God’s act of creation in language of mystery and majesty. Genesis 2 tells a different story, the story of God forming the human being out of the dust of the ground and breathing God’s own breath into him, the very breath of life.

After creating the human, the very next thing God does is to plant a garden. That speaks well to us. We’ve had our church garden for six years now. When we plan our garden, we talk to those for whom we are growing food. What do they need? What do they want to eat? Then our Building Community Team plans for the planting and the weeding and the watering and the harvesting of the crops. We’re in the middle of that now – if you want to help talk to Carolyn Jeffrey or Shaun Eyring.

God’s garden was a bit larger than ours, a bit more comprehensive. It contained everything the human being needed. As Genesis tells the story, it was more like an orchard than a garden, filled with every kind of tree that is beautiful and bears fruit, because God knows we need beauty as well as food. It was watered by four great rivers. And planted in the middle of the garden were two trees, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Now, the story from that point on is about what happens when Adam and Eve, the first humans, give into temptation and eat the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We know that story from our own mythology and because we live with the results in our own lives, struggling with choices, trying and failing to do the right thing.

But what about the tree of life? Genesis doesn’t say much more about it. Yet there it remains, planted in the middle of the garden. Its roots sink deep, taking nourishment from God’s good earth. Its branches reach out, spreading in beauty. Its fruit gives life to all who eat it. The tree is God’s life-giving creation.

As we think about our new identity, that is a good place to start. As Tree of Life Church, we are to be grounded in creation. We and all living things are a part of the great Tree of Life that Darwin and those after him are documenting. As we recognize that connectedness, we also realize that we have a responsibility as part of creation to care for creation. We already do that in some small ways – through our garden, as we use and wash dishes in the kitchen rather than just using paper and plastic. How else can we, in church and in our lives outside church be mindful of that creation connection?

I said already that the tree of life is God’s life-giving creation. Maybe the next step for us as we become Tree of Life Church is to be life-giving. That is easier said than done. It is easier to say no than to say yes. It is easier to shut out than to open up. It is easier to judge than to offer grace. Yet the God we worship is the source of life. In Christian tradition, Christ’s cross has been identified with the tree of life, offering new life to all through his death. We, who worship God, who follow Christ, are to be life-givers.

What does that look like? There are concrete ways we can give life to others. We do it when we grow food in our garden. We do it when we offer food and hospitality to people at Connect by Night. We do it when we participate in the Souperbowl of Caring. But being life-giving goes beyond offering others the simple concrete necessities of life.

Being life-giving is also an attitude. It is an attitude of accepting people as they are and giving them a place where they are welcome and can use their gifts. It is an attitude of giving permission for new things to grow. It is an attitude that affirms rather than cuts down. It is showing God’s life-giving love to others. It is offering healing in a broken world.

There’s still one more step to being a life-giving congregation, a step that is at the center of what we are about. A life-giving congregation is one that leads people to the One who is the source of life, to the God we know in Jesus Christ. We do that through our teaching, through our living, and most of all through our worship.

That God is the one who creates life in us and brings it to birth, who sustains us body and soul through all that life brings us, who when this life ends brings us through death and into eternal life. The life-giving God we worship creates the universe in all its grandeur and still knows the number of hairs on our heads. Even when we turn from God to choose the way of death, God reaches out to us through Jesus Christ, teaching us another way, reaching out his arms to us and welcoming us home. So we say thanks, and we show our thanks both through our worship and by how we live.

If we succeed in that, then we really will be Tree of Life Church, bearing God’s gift of life into the world.

As I’ve been thinking and learning about the tree of life, I’ve been on a treasure hunt to find what others have thought and written and drawn about the tree. One of those treasures is the song Brian is singing as our offertory this morning. It is an 14th century Hungarian hymn on Christ, the Tree of Life. The original version had 11 verses, but Brian won’t be singing that many. It was translated and set to a new tune by Eric Routley, one of the foremost 20th century hymn writers. The words are powerful, so they are printed on an insert in your bulletin. I encourage you to take them with you and reflect on them in the week ahead.