

**Fruit of Obedience**  
**June 28, 2015**  
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**Text: Genesis 2,3**

Our theme for the summer is witness trees. I begin this week with the trees in Genesis: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life. Next week Dora Alexander will take us straight to Revelation and the tree with the leaves for the healing of the nations. And so here at the beginning of the summer we begin with the Alpha and the Omega if you will, Genesis and Revelation within the first two weeks. And the rest of the summer we will explore everything else in between.

There are several ways we can understand “witness trees.” In scripture we consider the trees that are part of the story of God's work of salvation, part of the over arching narrative. We ask how do the trees in scripture witness and/or participate in God’s story? Also, the term “witness trees” has been used in this country for a couple of centuries to describe those trees that are left standing to mark the boundaries of newly cleared land. These trees if we could anthropomorphize them for a moment have witnessed the clearing of the forest around them, the cultivation of the land, sometimes the reforestation of the land and the ebb and flow of humanity and other creatures around them.

I realize it seems a little crazy to anthropomorphize trees, but there are actually some good reasons to do this. We are more like trees than you may initially realize. Let me read for a moment from a worship resource.

The author of this book says, “if you take a stethoscope on a spring walk and look for a young smooth bark tree, you can hear what sounds like a heartbeat through the stethoscope: the sound of sap being pumped against gravity, up the tree to the tips of the leaves. It sounds like our own heartbeat, and I often think of it as the heartbeat of creation.”

He goes on to say.

“We are connected to trees closer than you might think. I am no biologist, so it stunned me to discover, that if you take a single molecule of chlorophyll you have over a hundred atoms of carbon dioxide, nitrogen and hydrogen arranged in a complex and exact pattern around a single atom of magnesium. Now take a single molecule of hemoglobin and you have that exact same pattern of carbon dioxide, nitrogen and hydrogen around a single atom of iron. That is the only difference, that tiny atom of iron or magnesium. We can truly follow St. Francis, calling trees, and all sap-filled plants, our brother or sister.”

If you wonder at this similarity, I want to show you something else. In the three pictures that I have on the slides I want to show you the similarities between the inside of our lungs, and the branches and roots of a tree. See the way the veins and the arteries spread throughout the lungs. At the ends of the arteries and veins, capillaries – fine hair like tubes allow for the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide so we can breathe. Now see how the branches of the trees and the roots of the trees spread out into the air and the soil. Leaves

at the ends of those branches exchange oxygen and carbon dioxide so the trees can breathe. Likewise the roots spread out so that they can obtain nutrients from the soil and they also exchange carbon dioxide and nitrogen to other roots and trees in a remarkably interconnected way.

With all of this in mind now let's look at the story in Genesis.

There are two important trees in the story of Genesis. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and the tree of life as I've said.

We read about them in verse eight, of chapter 2.

In verse seven, we read that God formed a human from the dust of the ground and breathed into the human's nostrils the breath of life. And this earth creature became a living being. And then in verse eight God planted a garden in Eden. God placed the human in the garden. Then out of the ground, the same ground that God used to form the human, God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to sight and good for food. The tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil were among the trees that God created. And God placed these trees in the midst of the garden. In verse 15 we read again that God took the human that God had created, placed him in the garden to till it and keep it and then God placed limits on this human. "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." God provided for the human's needs, and then forbade the first human from eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil explaining that the fruit of disobedience would be death.

After this, God makes a partner for the first human and we come to know these humans as Adam and Eve. The reference at the end of chapter 2 to their nakedness and lack of shame reminds us that in the beginning they were innocent. These creatures of the dust were created good and innocent, just like everything else. We also know that things did not remain this way.

Evil in the form of the snake shows up and has a clever conversation with Eve. First the snake asks her if God has put so many limits on them that they cannot even eat from any of the trees. When Eve corrects the snake and says no "it's just the trees in the middle of the garden that we cannot eat or even touch," even Eve now no longer hears God clearly. God did not say they could not touch the trees. But the clever snake, this presence of evil, says to Eve that in fact she and Adam will not die if they eat its fruit. They will instead be like God knowing the difference between good and evil. And so Eve looks at the fruit again in a new way seeing that it is lovely to her sight and good to eat and even more that it is desirable for the knowledge that it can give and so she took the fruit and ate it and gave some to the man who also ate. And then they were aware of their nakedness and covered themselves with leaves, fig leaves. The leaves of the tree become their protection even as the fruit of the trees had been their food.

The rest of the story spells out the full extent of the fruit of their disobedience. The harmony between men and women is disrupted. The harmony between the humans and the snake is disrupted and most of all the relationship between God and humans whom God had

lovingly created has been disrupted. Their disobedience, the knowledge of good and evil will also lead to their death as God had told them. Adam and Eve are banished from the garden and God places cherubim with flaming sword at the entrance of the garden to guard the way to the tree of life. And humans leave the garden in order to till the soil from which they were taken and now to which they will return.

When we have told and retold this story in the past, the story has become famous for Eve and Adam's disobedience.

And while this is central to all tellings of the story we hear it in several ways.

Sometimes, we hear it as a story of how sin entered the world.

Sometimes we hear it as the story of the human desire to be like God.

Sometimes we hear it as a story about a real presence of evil in the world – evil that can be both clever and enticing in a way that can be hard to recognize and even harder to resist.

And sometimes we hear the story as a description of a normal tension in life. We all live within boundaries and often have the temptation to cross those boundaries or limits.

Living within boundaries requires obedience, especially boundaries set by our Creator – these boundaries require obedience to the creator and obedience to the order of creation as designed good by our God.

In fact in this story one would think that God's boundary setting required a rather simple obedience. God made all the fruit of all the plants and trees available to God's beloved humans, except the tree

of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life. Why were those trees so enticing?

Why are the fruits of those trees still so enticing? Are we so different? Do we also desire more than anything else knowledge of good and evil and life eternal?

Do we still desire the things that would make us like God?

I would probably raise my hand in response to these questions with, "guilty as charged."

I don't like limits.

I want to know so many things, good and evil among them.

I want a full rich life and I want that life to last for a long time.

Does this mean I want to be like God? Okay I'm not going to try to answer that, as much as anyone else.

What is it that God was asking of Adam and Eve?

Backtracking for a second, if disobedience leads to death then obedience leads to life. God created a good world. God created a world where humans initially recognized their place alongside the trees and other creatures of the ground. And the trees were beautiful and the trees were gift

and the trees supplied what humans needed to live, from oxygen to the fruit of their branches.

But every time human beings

reach for

and take

and consume beyond the limits set by God our creator

we disobey God's desire for and expectations of humans just as Eve

and Adam did.

We only have to survey our planet to know that we have surpassed many limits in a way that has become deathlike for the entire planet. We have disobeyed limits set for us by a Good God of a Good creation and the clearest fruit of disobedience is death.

If this story so clearly reveals the fruit of disobedience, what would the fruit of obedience look like?

I have a story that tries to answer that question. It was said about Abba John the Little that he went away to an old Theban in Scete who lived in the desert. Once the old man took a piece of dry wood, planted it and said to John: water it every day with a bottle of water until it bears fruit. The water was so far away from there that John had to go out late in the evening and come back the next morning. Three years later, the tree came to life and bore fruit. Then the old man took some of the fruit to the church, and said to the brothers: “take and eat the fruit of obedience.”

Do you hear the echo of the words of communion, “take and eat the fruit of obedience”?

This is a very different kind of “take and eat,” than Eve and Adam did in the garden. Just as the fruit of disobedience leads to death, the fruit of obedience leads to life.

The fruit of obedience has been shown to us by Jesus Christ.

All of us can bear the fruit of obedience if we abide in Christ and if we commit to a long, steady, obedient participation in the life of Christ. In this way the life of Christ becomes our life. Our loving creator desires life for us and the whole created order of which we are part. And in case we ever forget how intimately we are part of this creation, just think of the trees, the way they breath carbon dioxide in, oxygen out, and the way we breathe, oxygen in and carbon dioxide out – each of us giving and receiving in remarkably similar ways exactly what we need in this good and well-ordered creation. Let us do our part and live within our limits so like the trees we too will bear the fruit of obedience and live.