

A SERMON FROM SAINT FRANCIS

A LIFE IN TREES

A sermon preached by the Rev. Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., the fifth Sunday of Easter, May 2, 2010 at Saint Francis Episcopal Church, Potomac, Maryland. Based on the Gospel according to John, 13: 31 – 35.

‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’

Trees figure significantly in my life. As a young buck on summer vacation in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan I lumberjacked with my father, my uncle and my grandfather. We cut popple. An arborist calls it balsam poplar. Lumberjacks have still another name for it but it is too vulgar to say in the presence of ladies.

The way you harvest popple for the paper mills is you fell the tree, trim its branches, and cut the trunk into ‘stringers’ eight feet long. Before they get loaded onto the trailer of a logging truck, you have to peel the bark off the stringers. I was paid the handsome sum of ten cents for every stringer I peeled the bark off of. I could make a lot of money — four bits (fifty cents) — peeling the bark off just one tree! That doesn’t sound like much; actually it sounds like forced child labor, but the truth is that in the right season peeling the bark off popple is not as difficult as it sounds.

One summer during my college years, I bid successfully on a U. S. Forest Service contract to clear-cut twenty-five acres in the Ottawa National Forest. As things turned out, most of that work would be done by my dad and by my uncle Rod. I became useless when a tree fell on my head, knocking me out and breaking my clavicle. So now you know something of what I mean when I say that trees figure significantly in my life. I dream of trees; I’ve been put to sleep by one.

In our gospel lesson this morning, John writes, “At the last supper, when Judas had gone out, Jesus said [to his disciples], ‘Now the Son of Man has been glorified. . . . I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me but where I am going, you cannot come.’” It doesn’t take a Bible scholar to figure out that the figure of speech Jesus uses has to do with his death. But if that’s all we see here we aren’t reading the text closely enough. Jesus isn’t telling the apostles they can’t die. They all died eventually. The Blessed Mother. Mary Magdalene. Lazarus (again). What the apostles believed must not happen was that Jesus should die the way that he did. They knew what he was talking about.

“Where I am going, you cannot come.” It is a koan. Jesus speaks as a man bound for somewhere, a man binding himself for something, and to know what he’s up to we have

to go back another two thousand years to a place perhaps as close geographically to the upper room as Potomac Pizza is to Saint Francis Church. We have to go back to that harrowing scene on Mount Moriah upon which Jerusalem was built. We have to recall the binding of another son.

You remember the story. God tested Abraham saying, “‘Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains which I shall tell you.’ And Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and cut the wood for the burnt offering and when he saw from afar the place of which God told him, he said to two young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.’ And he took the wood and laid it on Isaac. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife.”

“So they went together, and Isaac said to his father Abraham, ‘My father!’ And he said, ‘Here am I, my son.’ Isaac said, ‘Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?’ Abraham said, ‘God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering my son.’” Abraham had heard that straight from God’s mouth and he believes it even if God will have to resurrect his son from the dead. And the angel of the Lord stays his hand before the lethal blow can be struck. “And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place, ‘Moriah’ (which means ‘the Lord will provide’).”

All over the Old Testament there are sacrifices made by the offerer. This is the first time God himself provides the sacrifice. The next time God himself provides the sacrifice is at Golgotha. That is on Mount Moriah where our Lord Jesus gave up his life on behalf of sinners. That’s where Jesus was crucified.

Storytelling in Genesis is laconic; no detail is extraneous, so when Abraham looks up and sees a ram caught by its horns in a *thicket*, we have to ask Why a thicket? The

answer to that question is also the answer to the question: Why does Abraham sacrifice the ram rather than do what you and I would have done and let it go?

We hear ‘thicket’ and we think shrubbery or underbrush, but the word [*sbach*] is used five times in the Old Testament and in every case it refers not to forsythia or to a gorse bush like Winnie the Pooh’s but to dense woods. Rams don’t get tangled up in bushes. This is what Isaiah speaks of when he says “the Lord will cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe.” Psalm 74 refers to “the man who wields an axe to cut his way through the thicket of trees.”

People in the ancient world used trees the way we use them: to mark a site, to provide fruit or shade or decoration, to stand for something symbolically. Just so they are places of divine judgment in the Bible. If you were in a city, court would be held at the gates, but everywhere else court normally was held under a tree. Deborah was a judge in her day and she judged Israel under the date palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel. Why under a tree? Because the tree will be the implement of judgment that rests in the hand of the court.

If you were found guilty of a capital crime in ancient Israel you would be stoned. But if you were found guilty of something even more heinous than that you would be executed and then they would take your body and hang it on the tree. That symbolized divine judgment. It was the ancient way of inviting God to continue the punishment in the afterlife. So we read in Deuteronomy, “If a man is guilty of a capital offense and is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight but be sure to bury him that same day because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse.”

There are a lot of examples. The king of Ai was responsible for the death not of one Israelite but of many. Israel was routed in that first battle with Ai, so after the Israelites sacked Jericho, Joshua “hung the king of Ai on a tree and left him there until evening. At sunset Joshua ordered them to take his body from the tree and throw it down at the entrance of the city gate, and they raised a large pile of rocks over it which remains to this day.” The Joshua tree of the American southwest was named after Joshua because it was thought to resemble in its branches the outstretched arm of Joshua as he pointed with his spear to the city of Ai.

The five Amorite kings in Joshua 10, God intervened in that battle. The five who’d been such a curse to Israel are now themselves under a curse. “Joshua struck and killed the kings and hung them on five trees and they were left hanging on the trees until evening. At sunset Joshua gave the order and they took them down from the trees and threw them into a cave where they had been hiding and at the

mouth of the cave they placed large rocks which are there to this day.” The seven sons of Saul, and so on. Or Haman, the Old Testament Hitler who plots a genocide of the Jews. Haman built what the Book of Esther calls an *etz*, a tree. We would call it a gallows. On it he intended to hang Mordecai the godly uncle of Esther. But Haman fell into his own trap aided by the cunning Esther, and the Persian King Ahasuerus ordered his prime minister hung from the tree. To this day little children read the story at Purim and whenever they hear the name Haman they hiss and boo.

And Absalom the son of David who led Israel in a revolution against his own father, lifting his hand against the Lord’s anointed. That led to the death of many of God’s people. David ordered his generals to protect for his sake the young man Absalom if they came upon him, and as Absalom went riding his mule through the forest and the mule went under the thick branches of an oak, Absalom’s head got caught in the tree so that he was left hanging in midair while the mule kept on going. When one of the soldiers told David’s general that he had seen Absalom hanging from a tree, Joab said to him, “And you didn’t kill him?”

Joab was a reliable general and he loved Absalom; but a man hanging on a tree is self-evidently under God’s curse. So to make clear that this was not personal vengeance but divine justice Joab commanded ten of his soldiers to execute Absalom. The prince of the realm and the pride of the people, Absalom was Israel’s beloved son, but after they killed him they cut him down from the tree, buried him in a pit in the forest, and piled up a large heap of rocks over him. This *leitmotif* of rocks piled onto the grave of a man hung on a tree ought to ring bells in your Easter minds.

This is why the New Testament talks about the *offense* of the cross. It isn’t that crucifixion is bloody, or humiliating, or excruciating, or lethal — none of that makes crucifixion an offense to the Hebraic imagination. It’s the damnation signified by dying on a tree. It’s that all the most heinous sinners that defile the face of the earth from Genesis to Malachi, the Most High arranges for them to die on trees.

When the apostles were going up to Jerusalem, they knew they were marked men, and Thomas said, “Let us go with Jesus to die with him.” But here at the last supper Jesus says, “Where I am going, you cannot come,” to make clear that they are not bound in the way that he is. If they went out and were crucified with him they wouldn’t be doing what he alone is bound in the glory of the Father to do. The Apostle Paul in his midrash puts it this way: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung from a tree.’” Amen.