

The Tree of Life

This week, the lectionary invites us on a journey into the Holy City, where we can reflect on the infrastructure and ecology of peace, the peace the gospel text testifies to as Jesus invites his disciples to breathe and believe into the peace he shares with them. Both texts build a bridge together in witness to the peaceful, joyful love of God's regenerative kin-dom.

As recounted in Revelation 22:1-2, John saw a resplendent tree growing in the heart of the city, along both sides of a sparkling river flowing from the seat of power God shares with the Christ-Lamb. This generous tree produces twelve types of fruit, while the leaves "are for the healing of the nations" (22:2). John's vision resonates with another ancient prophecy (Ezekiel 40-47) of trees growing along the sides of the river, with fruit ripening each month and "their leaves for healing" (47:12). With Ezekiel, life-giving water flows as a river from the Temple. But in John's vision, years after the Temple's destruction, the whole city reveals the divine residence. God has become "all in all" (1 Cor.15:28).

Revelation 22 also resonates with the hopeful future Isaiah prophesied as God's invitation for "the nations" to come drink clear water flowing freely from the temple mount. (Is. 55:1-5). The welcome signifies that for these prophets, the New Creation signifies not a return to the Eden of Genesis (2:9), but a cosmopolitan hope. As Catherine Keller observes, "John was dreamreading a new multiplicity of nations, finally at peace in their differences...[T]he nations here branch into a healthy planetary life."^[1] Yet, John of Patmos observed that the "unclean" (21:27) remained outside the city. Inside, the "glory" of the "nations" and "kings of the earth" became subsumed into the immanent, omnipresent God-light, like a vast solar energy source (22:24).

In reflecting on the apocalyptic text, we will want to consider John's prophetic imagination seriously, but not literally. John's vision taps into the roots of an ancient archetype and cultural symbol. Across religious and philosophical traditions, the tree of life shows up again and again, signifying wisdom, kinship, nourishment, and abundance. Often, great trees mark historic places of treaty-making and shared peace commitments. They mark a point, a cosmic center from which peace flows into the world. Similarly, in our gospel text (John 14:23-29), Jesus invited his followers to share in a relationship where peace

flowed, like his very breath, into them and out into the world (John 14:27). As we believe into Christ, we are drawn to the very ground of peace, sustained on the generosity and grace of God. The eighteenth-century pastor Richard Hutchins imagined the nurture of this relation in a poem he titled, “Jesus Christ the Apple Tree.”[2]

Revelation’s tree of life, with its nourishing fruits and healing leaves, can remind us of the ancient wisdom spoken anew today by Indigenous writers regarding *food as medicine*. Robin Wall Kimmerer, botanist and Citizen Potawatomi member, explains “Plants know how to make food and medicine from light and water, and then they give it away.”[3] White Earth activist Winona LaDuke explains the Anishinaabe wisdom of healing: “The recovery of the people is tied to the recovery of food, since food itself is medicine; not only for the body but for the soul, for the spiritual connection to history, ancestors and the land.”[4]

The connection between trees and healing can be seen further in the role trees play in photosynthesis, where leaves draw carbon dioxide and water from the atmosphere to produce various carbon-based sugars necessary for growth. Every part of a tree stores carbon, from the trunks, branches, leaves, and roots. Recent studies show how mature trees extract more carbon dioxide from the atmosphere than young trees, locking it into new wood. So, while planting new trees serves as a natural climate solution, protecting large, established trees provides greater potential in addressing the drawdown needed for climate targets.[5]

After they fall, decaying leaves enhance soil health, prevent erosion, and provide mulch that protects plants, retains moisture, and offers habitats for insects, small mammals, reptiles, amphibians and birds. While they grow, leaves release fragrances with chemical compounds that can calm our minds and boost our moods. Instead of consigning leaves to landfills as waste, where they rot and produce methane, leaves can be reclaimed as valuable for earth’s natural, sustainable cycles.[6] Maybe John of Patmos was on to something we see more clearly now through our sciences—leaves are for the healing of nations, especially in our time of great environmental precarity!