

LENTEN MIDWEEK 2

March 4, 2020

AS WE GATHER

The trees of the Bible help us realize why we need a Savior, how God provided a Savior for us in the person of Jesus Christ, and how the saved lives of repentant believers look. Today we consider the great trees of Mamre, under which the Lord graciously visited Abraham, though nearby were Sodom and Gomorrah, which God planned to destroy, as well as the cave in which Abraham would bury Sarah. In our sinful condition, we deserve the cities' punishment. But for the sake of our Lord Jesus, descended from Abraham and Sarah, we live in an oasis of life, as it were, amid the desert of this sin-ridden world.

HYMN “The God of Abraham Praise” [Sts. 1–2, 5–6: *LSB* 798]

Pastor: In the name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

People: Amen.

OPENING SENTENCES *Psalm 1:1–3; 96:12–13; Isaiah 61:1, 3*

Pastor: Blessed is the man whose delight is in the law of the LORD.

People: He is like a tree planted by streams of water.

Pastor: The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; . . .

People: that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD.

Pastor: Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the LORD,

People: for He comes, for He comes to judge the earth.

CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION *Psalm 80:19; Isaiah 61:1, 3*

Pastor: Let us confess our sins to God our heavenly Father.

People: Heavenly Father, we confess that we are bound to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have “eaten forbidden fruit” in our thoughts, words, and deeds. We have not produced spiritual fruit in keeping with the new life You have won for us. For the sake of

Jesus' sacrifice on the tree of the cross, grant us Your forgiveness. Restore us, O Lord God of hosts! Let Your face shine, that we may be saved! Amen.

Pastor: After His triumph over Satan's temptations in the wilderness, Jesus went to the synagogue in Nazareth and announced that the prophecy of Isaiah was being fulfilled in Him. The prophet had written, "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me . . . to grant to those who mourn in Zion . . . a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified." As a called and ordained servant of Christ I therefore forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

People: Amen. Thanks be to God.

PSALM *Psalm 96; antiphon: vv. 12b–13a*

Pastor: Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
before the LORD, for He comes, for He comes to judge the earth.
Oh sing to the LORD a new song;

People: sing to the LORD, all the earth!

Pastor: Sing to the LORD, bless His name;

People: tell of His salvation from day to day.

Pastor: Declare His glory among the nations,

People: His marvelous works among all the peoples!

Pastor: For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;

People: He is to be feared above all gods.

Pastor: For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols,

People: but the LORD made the heavens.

Pastor: Splendor and majesty are before Him;

People: strength and beauty are in His sanctuary.

Pastor: Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,

People: ascribe to the LORD glory and strength!

Pastor: Ascribe to the LORD the glory due His name;

People: bring an offering, and come into His courts!

Pastor: Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness;

People: tremble before Him, all the earth!

Pastor: Say among the nations, “The LORD reigns!

Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved;

People: He will judge the peoples with equity.”

Pastor: Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;

People: let the sea roar, and all that fills it;

Pastor: let the field exult, and everything in it!

**People: Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the LORD,
for He comes, for He comes to judge the earth.**

Pastor: He will judge the world in righteousness,

People: and the peoples in His faithfulness.

Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy

before the LORD, for He comes, for He comes to judge the earth.

FIRST READING

Genesis 18; 23:1–20

(God graciously visits Abraham, although He plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.)

¹⁸ And the LORD appeared to him by the oaks^[a] of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. ² He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth ³ and said, “O Lord,^[b] if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, ⁵ while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” ⁶ And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said, “Quick! Three seahs^[c] of fine flour! Knead it, and make cakes.” ⁷ And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man, who prepared it quickly. ⁸ Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them. And he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

¹⁶ Then the men set out from there, and they looked down toward Sodom. And Abraham went with them to set them on their way. ¹⁷ The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, ¹⁸ seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? ¹⁹ For I have chosen ^[f] him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.” ²⁰ Then the LORD said, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, ²¹ I will go down to see whether they have done altogether ^[g] according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, I will know.”

³² Then he said, “Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.” ³³ And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place.

23 Sarah lived 127 years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. ² And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. ³ And Abraham rose up from before his dead and said to the Hittites, ^[a] ⁴ “I am a sojourner and foreigner among you; give me property among you for a burying place, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.”

¹⁴ Ephron answered Abraham, ¹⁵ “My lord, listen to me: a piece of land worth four hundred shekels ^[c] of silver, what is that between you and me? Bury your dead.” ¹⁶ Abraham listened to Ephron, and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants.

¹⁷ So the field of Ephron in Machpelah, which was to the east of Mamre, the field with the cave that was in it and all the trees that were in the field, throughout its whole area, was made over ¹⁸ to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the Hittites, before all who went in at the gate of his city. ¹⁹ After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah east of Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. ²⁰ The field and the cave that is in it were made over to Abraham as property for a burying place by the Hittites.

Lector: O Lord, have mercy on us.

People: Thanks be to God.

Lenten Midweek 2

Great Trees of Mamre near the Machpelah

Psalm 96; Genesis 18:1–33; 23:1–20

In the fall of 2018, a shooting left a dozen people dead at a country music bar and, a day later, a wildfire raged through this same community of Thousand Oaks, California, forcing hundreds to evacuate. The mayor of this city, Andy Fox, referred to what he called the strongest of trees for which his city was named and said the people of Thousand Oaks would show their strength through their resilience after the crises.⁵

All of us face crisis in our lives. Perhaps not as severe, by God's grace, as those of the community of Thousand Oaks California, but when you are in a crisis it seems severe at the time.

All of us also live among the Bible's trees, such as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that we heard about last week and the "oaks" of Mamre near the Machpelah that we hear about this week. Tonight/Today we continue our special Lenten sermon series, "Living among the Bible's Trees."

I. We deserve to be deserted by God.

Our text begins, "And the Lord appeared to [Abraham] by the oaks of Mamre" (Gen 18:1). With a number of different original Hebrew words in use, instead of "oak" trees, translators sometimes call these trees "great trees" or "Terebinth,"⁶ and so we might at least say that the trees of Mamre were notable for their size. Abraham had moved his tent by these trees of Mamre near Hebron, and as he settled there he also built an altar to the Lord (Gen 13:18).

It is by these great trees that the Lord reiterated his promise of a son for Abraham and Sarah, this time in Sarah's hearing (compare Gen 17:15–21). Later in Genesis 23 we hear of Abraham's acquiring the land just east of Mamre, with its trees and the cave of Machpelah, which Abraham wanted for a burying place, initially for Sarah. Later it was also used for burial of Abraham himself (Gen 25:9–10), their son Isaac (Gen 35:27, 29), Isaac's wife Rebekah, their son Jacob, Jacob's wife Leah (Gen 49:29–32; 50:13), and perhaps also Jacob's son Joseph (Gen 50:25; Ex 13:19; Heb 11:22; cf Josh 24:32 and Acts 7:15–16).⁸

In the thousands of years since these burials, locations of both Abraham's

“oak” and the cave of the Machpelah have been and still are thought to be known. It was even claimed that one of the trees in that place went back all the way to creation.⁹ That seems far-fetched, but historical reports and archaeological evidence attesting to this as the site of Abraham’s cave do go back centuries before the time of Christ.

As sad as the loss of that oak or any other single tree might be, sadder still is humanity’s loss of access to the whole garden of trees that, in the beginning. For Abraham and his household, the great trees of Mamre were an oasis in the desert, a reprieve from the sun and heat, and a place to rest, but these trees were nevertheless also a reminder of the better garden lost through sin.¹⁰ Before the fall, there was no oppressive heat, no need for an oasis in the desert; the warmth of the sun was always only welcome. Much worse, in the time after Abraham, the shady oases under similar large trees became sites of sin, especially prostitution in the fertility rites of false worship (Is 1:29; 57:5; Ezek 6:13; Hos 4:13–14).¹¹

Greater than the loss of access to the Garden of Eden’s trees is the death our first parents died and we ourselves will die, and deservedly so because of our sinful nature and of all our sin. God did not hide his judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah from Abraham, and neither does God hide his judgment of others’ and our own sin from us. In interceding for Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham confessed his own origin from dust and destination to ashes.¹² Enabled by God, we do well to do the same: repent, at least figuratively in dust and ashes, this Lenten season and always. For when we repent, God forgives our sinful nature and all our sin. God forgives us for the sake of Abraham’s greatest offspring, Jesus Christ.

II. We are blessed in Abraham’s offspring, Jesus Christ.

The Second Person of the Blessed Trinity in human flesh descended from Abraham; Jesus Christ is the offspring of Abraham in whom all the nations of the earth are blessed. Jesus was born, lived, and died on the cross in order to save every person from his or her sin, including you and me. Out of his great love for you and for me, Jesus gives his perfect life in place of our imperfect lives; Jesus died the death our sins deserve, so that we do not have to die eternally. And Jesus rose from the dead and thereby showed his victory over sin, death, and the power of the devil for us. Abraham’s intercession and mediation for Sodom and Gomorrah may have led to the saving, in the end, of

three lives—his nephew Lot and Lot’s two daughters (Gen 19:15–26)—but Jesus’ intercession and mediation for us leads to the saving of a far greater number of lives, as we repent of our sin and receive his forgiveness through his Means of Grace.

Abraham providing unleavened bread for the Lord and those with him? That especially points us to the Sacrament of the Altar, where unleavened bread is the body of Christ given for us and wine is the blood of Christ shed for us, giving us the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. But better than the meal Abraham served the Lord under the great trees of Mamre, at this altar and its rail the Lord himself serves us. Here he has fellowship with us, all of us who are brought into his household, not by the covenant of circumcision made with hands (cf Gen 17:1–27) but by what the divinely inspired St. Paul calls the circumcision made without hands, the circumcision of Christ.

In Holy Baptism, we are buried with Christ and raised with him through faith (Col 2:11–12). This house of God is the oasis in the desert of our lives, for here we have rest and refreshment, as Abraham and the Lord had under the great trees at Mamre. *Considering the great trees of Mamre near the Machpelah, we realize that, though we deserve to be deserted by God, we are blessed in Abraham’s offspring, Jesus Christ.*

The trees near the cave of the Machpelah no doubt helped locate the cave where Sarah and the others were buried. Abraham’s purchase of that burying place proceeded from his faith—his faith in God’s promise not only to give the land to his descendants but also to raise the dead on the Last Day. God similarly gives us faith to live in our callings, including our callings as faithful spouses and relatives interceding for those who do not have faith in Christ and burying loved ones gives clear witness to the sure and certain hope of the resurrection. God gives us faith, too, to serve in our callings as faithful employees or students and in all of the other life settings. God makes us to be what Isaiah referred to as “oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified” (Is 61:3).¹³ And after the resurrection of the dead, our access to the tree of life is restored in the heavenly Jerusalem that comes down out of heaven from God (Rev 21:2; 22:1–2).

Months after the shooting and fire in Thousand Oaks, local high schools participated in a marching band showcase because the shooting and fire had cut their regular marching band season short. The event was in fact much more than a marching band showcase. For the Thousand Oaks community, it was a

commemoration of everything they had been through and a celebration of all they could do together.¹⁴ Music is also often part of our celebration when God brings us through everything he permits us to face. For example, Psalm today (Ps 96:12b–13a) describes the trees of the forest as if human, singing for joy because the Lord comes to judge the earth. While that judgment means eternal condemnation for the unrepentant, by God’s grace for the sake of Jesus Christ, that judgment also means eternal salvation for those of us who repent. Amen.

SERIES HYMN “Among the Bible’s Trees” [Tune: LSB 595]

Among the Bible’s trees we live.
How true they grow, as well they should.
From them may we this Lententide
Learn how our Lord died for our good.

Amid the desert’s barrenness
Stood Mamre’s oaks, so firm and tall.
And Abram there received the Lord,
Who promised grace for one and all.

God’s judgment we deserve indeed,
Like sinful cities on the plain.
But from old Sarah was to come
Our Savior, Christ, in us to reign.

Lord Jesus Christ, God’s only Son,
Whose body hung on Calv’ry’s tree,
O living Word, Your sacrifice
Pardon proclaims eternally.

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OFFERING *Psalm 96:8–9*

PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

Pastor: Let us pray for the Church here and around the world, and people everywhere in their various needs.

For everyone weighed down by their bondage to sin and an inability to stop sinning by thought, word, and deed, let us pray to the Lord.

People: For the sake of Christ's sacrifice on the tree of the cross, heavenly Father, open their ears to hear the Gospel anew; free them to live before You in Your kingdom.

Pastor: For everyone who has fallen prey to society's distorted morality, let us pray to the Lord.

People: For the sake of Christ's sacrifice on the tree of the cross, heavenly Father, surround them with faithful and caring members of the Body of Christ; call them back in repentance and hope.

Pastor: For those who keep the peace at home or are deployed abroad, for those who provide care and guidance in relationships, finances, and health, and for those who respond to natural disasters and crises of various sorts, let us pray to the Lord.

People: For the sake of Christ's sacrifice on the tree of the cross, heavenly Father, accompany them with Your Holy Spirit; protect them from harm, and give them wisdom in all circumstances.

Pastor: For ourselves and the Church around the world as we seek to produce true spiritual fruit, let us pray to the Lord.

People: For the sake of Christ's sacrifice on the tree of the cross, heavenly Father, assure us that we are Your pleasant planting; forgive our errors, and send us to serve in faithfulness and love.

Pastor: These and any other things You would have us ask, heavenly Father, grant to us for the sake of the sufferings and death of Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

People: Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER *(Matthew 6:9–13)*

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen

BENEDICTION

Pastor: The blessing of God Almighty—who created you, forgave all your sins, and strengthens you for service in His kingdom—be upon you now and forever.

People: Amen.

HYMN “Fruitful Trees, the Spirit’s Sowing” [*LSB* 691]

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