

April 26, 2020 – 1 Peter 1:17-25, Acts 2:36-41, Luke 24:13-35

Cutting down a tree can be a surprisingly emotional decision. We had to make such a decision years ago, up in Michigan. It was a beautiful black maple tree, sitting in the front yard of the parsonage. Back, in its prime, it was a wonderful shade tree. One of those huge trees with immense character that made the whole property more attractive.

But it had to go. It was obviously dying. Huge sections of it were completely bare of leaves. And when the tree trimmers came with chainsaws to chop through the base of the trunk, they said it was like trying to cut through topsoil. The entire interior was rotted and decomposed.

I remember joking with one of them that someone should start counting rings. He looked at me and said, "I lost track at 40 and I wasn't even halfway done." That was an old tree. Older than the parsonage. Probably older than the congregation itself. Many plants come and go over the years. But not trees. Trees can outlive their owners.

And yet, even trees eventually die. 80 year old maples eventually start to rot. Thousand year old redwoods will just one day fall over. There is no plant on this earth that lives forever.

Just as there is no person on this earth that lives forever either. Not in these sinful, mortal bodies at least. As St Peter reminds us in our Epistle today, "*All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass.*"

Well, there's a comforting thought. I'm like a blade of grass. I live for a little bit. Maybe grow a flower or two. And then I die. And no one really notices.

Because grass is just... grass. It's there to be walked on and ignored. The only time anyone might notice it is to pick a wildflower and then watch it wither. That's how much glory there is in our lives.

In the grand scheme of things, we're not even trees, that survive from season to season and then die. No, we're alive for one season and one season only. That's it. Peter really knows how to cheer a guy up.

And yet, he has a point, and it's an important one for our generation. Because one of the fundamental messages of our day is the idea that we can somehow cheat death through the glory of our accomplishments. That if we can just be remembered by enough people, maybe we can become immortal.

If we can just be loved by enough people, we're not really dead. If we can just do enough good in the world then our legacy will live on. If we can just become rich enough or famous enough or successful enough then our place in society will be secured. Our names will be written in history books, and we'll be remembered forever. And that's just as good as immortality.

But it's not true. It's not true, for one, because... well... you're still dead. I mean, OK, so someone loved you. Someone remembers you. Someone reads your name on a plaque in the lobby of a building. How, exactly, does that make you more than worm food?

But it's also not true because you won't be loved forever. You won't be remembered forever. You won't be famous forever. It's easy to think that men like George Washington or William Shakespeare will be celebrities for all eternity.

But honestly, they've only been dead for a couple hundred years. Tell me, how many people from the year 3,000 B.C. do you remember? Maybe a couple people from the Bible. Maybe an Egyptian Pharaoh or two. Not a whole lot.

All flesh is like grass and our greatest glories are like the flowers of grass. We wither. We fall. We're forgotten. You're fooling yourself if you think otherwise. And the pride involved in doing so is more than a little sinful.

According to Peter, there's only one thing that remains forever: the Word of the Lord. And when we hear that, it's easy to think that Peter's talking about the Bible. And he is, but not in the way we often think when we hear this passage.

Because Peter tells us that we've been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding Word of God. Originally, each of us was born of perishable seed. We were born to be grass. To live for a season. To wither. To die. And to be forgotten. That's the curse of sin at work. Dust to dust. Nothing more.

But then, the Word of God came to us. It came to us joined with water in Baptism. It came to us in the voice of a friend or a parent or a pastor. It came to us in a book that we read and understood.

However it happened, the living and abiding Word of God came to us. It filled us. Like it filled those two disciples on the road to Emmaus when Jesus opened the scriptures to them. Until their hearts burned within them.

And it changed us. So that our rebirth was not of perishable seed, but of imperishable. We became more than grass that withers and is forgotten. Not because of anything we did. But because of the Word of God living within us.

The Word of the Lord remains forever. And as a result, so will we. Because this Word is the good news that was preached to us. This Word is the Gospel. The good news that Jesus Christ, a lamb without blemish or spot, shed His blood for us and was raised from the dead. That His blood ransoms us from death and the grave. And gives us faith and hope in God.

And that good news changes people. It changed the disciples on the road to Emmaus. So that all of scripture was opened up to them in a whole new way. It changed the three thousand people who heard Peter preach on Pentecost morning. So that those who once cried out "crucify him" now looked upon their sinfulness and cried out in repentance, "What shall we do?" And were baptized in the name of the one they crucified for the forgiveness of their sins.

And it changes us as well. Our culture tells us that we will find immortality in our goodness to others. That if we're just good enough people, we will live on in their memories. If we earn their respect. If we gain their love. If we bring joy into their lives. Then we're immortal.

But Peter flips the whole thing on its head. Since you have been born again of imperishable seed and having purified your souls, therefore love one another earnestly from a pure heart. Yes, we should earn their respect. Yes, we should gain their love. Yes we should bring joy to their lives. And yes, we should always do good to others.

But we do it not to be immortal, but because we're immortal. Our souls have been purified by the truth. We know what it means to show brotherly love because we have seen the love of God poured out in Jesus Christ. And now we bear God's Word within us. A living and abiding proof that we will remain forever with Him. Because God's Word remains forever.

We are trees planted by living water, that will never rot or fade. We are disciples continually renewed by heavenly food, even in the midst of our doubts and disbelief. We are those who crucified our Lord and yet find ourselves called to him with forgiveness and love, day after day after day.

The Lord has risen indeed. And in these last days, we preach this good news to all the world. So that with brotherly love and a pure heart, they may know the living and abiding Word of God that remains with us and in us forever. Amen.