

We came home to a sight none of us could have expected. The tree next to our driveway, maybe 50' from our house, was split. A jagged burn mark ran down the length of the trunk, splintering the wood on either side and cutting a deep gash through the heart of an old maple.

The tree had been there since long before I was born. Possibly even before our house was built in the early 1950's. It was massive. It had a trunk I certainly couldn't wrap my arms around as a child, and probably couldn't wrap my arms around today.

And while we were gone on vacation, it had been struck by lightning. Our neighbors told us of the blinding flash and deafening boom that rocked the neighborhood when it happened. They immediately ran to make sure the tree was still standing and not in flames. No, the tree was still there. For the moment.

But it wouldn't last. The leaves began to die almost immediately. Eventually, half of the split trunk tore away and collapsed into the yard. The other half was only a matter of time. It had to be cut down.

It's funny how we can feel sentimental about... trees. Losing an old tree can feel like losing a beloved pet. And yet, pets do things. They have personality. But trees? They just stand there, don't they?

Well... yes and no. They do just stand there. But we don't. Our lives take place around them. I grew up playing around that maple tree. My memories are tied to it. Which is why the older a tree is, the harder it is to see it go.

Now, of course, we can replant trees. If my mom had wanted to, she could have gone out the day after the old maple was cut down and planted a maple seed right there in its spot. But that maple tree was at least 50 years old. And that's a long time to wait for a new tree.

Our Advent series this year is called Jesse Tree. And we'll be diving into many trees of the Bible over the next few weeks. Including Jesus' own family tree. But today, we'll start at the beginning, by talking about the trees in the Garden of Eden.

There were many trees in the Garden of Eden, from the sounds of it. They were part of God's creation. God's good creation. At every point, God looked at what he had made and said, "This is good."

Why was it good? Well, it was good because it was exactly the way God made it to be. And it was good because it was exactly what we needed. This world, this garden, was to be a home for Adam and Eve. It was good because our good heavenly Father had given it as a good gift to his good children. Children made in his own image.

But, of course, when we think about the trees in the Garden of Eden, we think most of all about those two special trees in the center of the garden. First, there's the tree of life. A tree that embodies all of God's power and love in the sinless world that He created for Adam and Eve. A tree meant to be a source of blessing and restoration and... well... life. To the fullest. For all eternity.

And then there's the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Which was not the tree of sin, contrary to popular belief. There was nothing inherently evil about the tree itself or about its fruit. In fact, it was among the creations which God called "good" when he made the world.

Because it was a good thing to obey God and worship Him through that obedience. It was a good thing for Adam and Eve to look at that tree and look at everything else in the garden and to say, "God has provided us with so much. More than enough to meet every one of our needs. So I am going to be obedient. And I am not going to eat from that tree."

That was the good use of the tree. But what Adam and Eve did with it was evil. It was evil to disobey God's command. It was evil for them – the Creation – to seek the power of God – the Creator. It was evil for them to doubt God's love and provision for them, and believe that he had withheld from them something good.

And as all of this evil poured out of their hearts, they destroyed the perfection of God's creation. They destroyed their access to the garden and the tree of life that had been given to them. And they destroyed their own lives. Their own futures. Their own children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

In essence, they destroyed another tree in that garden: their family tree. A family tree that really wasn't their own. It was God's. God was their Father. He was their creator. When they sinned, they took a lightning bolt to God's family tree. And split it from top to bottom. They burned it from the highest branch to the deepest root.

And what they left behind was more dangerous alive than dead. Because at every moment, humanity is on the verge of collapsing under the weight of our own sin. There is so much dead, rotting wood in us that even if we wanted to be the tree God intended us to be, we'd crumble and fall.

So God cuts us down. He cuts us down little by little through death and hell. But he also promises to cut us down on the last day, when not even a stump of humanity's sinful trunk will be left behind. He has no choice really. One way or another, we're going to come down.

And yet, that's not all that God has planned for us. Because the Garden of Eden wasn't the only place where God planted special trees. After humanity was cast out of the garden, God planted a new tree. We read in our Old Testament Lesson, *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."*

At that moment, God planted a new family tree. In fact, other translations of that verse even go so far as to use the word "seed" to describe Eve's offspring. Those simple words were the planting of a new seed. That would sprout and grow and mature into a new tree of life for all God's people.

A new tree, untouched by sin and untouchable by evil. A tree for us, in fact. For though we are each born onto a dead tree, destined for destruction, we are grafted to this new tree. Cut from the old and bound onto the new by the skill of a master gardener.

We couldn't do it of ourselves, any more than a branch can cut itself from one tree and grow onto another. No, it was done to us. In the Word of God and in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, the Holy Spirit does it to us. He binds us to Christ – the tree that the Father has planted – and connects us so closely to our Lord that it's impossible to even see where Christ ends and we begin.

This new tree that God planted was not quick in growing. Trees never are. But the seed was planted. The promise was there. It would take several thousand years, but that tree would sprout and grow and be born of a virgin in a Bethlehem stable. The offspring not of man and woman, but of woman alone, just as God had foretold.

That is the promise of Advent. A new tree of life, coming into this earth. A new family tree to replace the one destroyed by sin. A Christmas tree, born to give us life. Life in abundance.

What God cuts down, He also plants anew. What God kills with the curse of death he also restores with a seed of new life. The creator has restored his creation. And in Christ, all things are made new... even our family tree. Amen.