

SERMON TITLE: "The Tree of Life: God's Healing Fruit"  
SERMON TEXT: Revelation 21:15 – 22:5  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: November 5, 2023, at First United Methodist Church

### **INTRODUCTION**

With so many disasters and troubles in the world coming to our attention every week, it's easy to forget about the ones that were in the news just a few months ago. But maybe you remember the terrible fires that happened on the Hawaiian island of Maui in early August. The town of Lahaina was especially devastated, with 99 people known to have died. The famous Lahaina Banyan tree was also damaged in that fire. When it was planted in 1873, that Banyan tree was eight feet tall. Today, 150 years later, the tree stands over 60 feet tall and shades 2/3 of an acre with its far-reaching branches. Over the years, the branches have sent aerial roots back down to the earth; consequently, that one Banyan tree now has 46 vertical trunks. Because of the massive and unusual shape of the tree, it has been a source of pride for local Hawaiians and a photo op for tourists. Naturally, people were worried that the Banyan tree might have been fatally injured in the fire. Fortunately, some green leaves have sprouted from the charred branches, and life seems to be returning to the giant tree.

This week I read an article about other trees there on Maui that were also damaged by the fire. Those trees are called "ulu," or "breadfruit", trees. Those ulu trees had a much older history than the Banyan tree, as they were brought by Polynesians to the island over 1000 years ago. The bread fruits, which appear to be about the size of a grapefruit, provided an important source of food starch like potatoes or bread. Even before the fires, the breadfruit trees had been in decline, and there were only 12 of them left on Maui. The fires destroyed all but two of those. But arborists have been working hard ever since to dig up healthy roots and nurture them, so they can sprout and plant them around the island. The arborists hope to heal and restore the ulu tree of life, whose fruit can feed and heal the island's people.

Four weeks ago, when we began this worship series on the Tree of Life, our first call to worship came from Genesis 2, where we read that, within the Garden of Eden, God had planted a tree of life. Today, as we wrap up this series, we've gone from the beginning of the Bible to the end, to the final two chapters of Revelation, and once again we've encountered this powerful image. This morning I invite you to imagine with me the tree of life as the source of God's healing fruit.

### **1—DESCRIPTION OF THE CITY**

The Book of Revelation is written as a description of what the prophet John saw in a vision while he was on the Island of Patmos. Because we misunderstand the literary style and purpose of this ancient writing, there are many details in the vision that are confusing and even disturbing to us modern-day readers. But, in these final two chapters, Christians throughout the ages have found imagery that provides great comfort and eternal hope.

When we die, or when this turbulent and suffering world comes to an end, and God recreates it all, who doesn't want to live in an orderly city where the streets are made of gold, and where the foundations and walls are decorated with jewels? Even if we assume that these are poetic and literary images rather than actual ones, we get the sense that our eternal home will be a beautiful place. This city, where the tree of life is growing, will be a place of loveliness and plenty. While our earthly and mortal existence may have included a lot of struggle and poverty, God has something wonderfully extravagant planned for our future.

I like that there are 12 different gemstones mentioned in these verses. While that most quickly brings to our minds the 12 different monthly birthstones, this revelation to John probably wasn't intending that. The reason for 12 different stones and 12 different gates into the city had to do with the 12 tribes of Israel. The number 12 meant that all would be included. None would be left out. Every group and every type of God's people could look forward to this heavenly city.

In the 1800s, a woman by the name of Annie Wittenmeyer wrote a hymn anticipating this joy:

The burdens of life may be many,  
 the frowns of the world may be cold.  
 To me it will matter but little,  
 when I stand on the streets of gold.  
 With joy I shall enter that city,  
 the face of my Savior behold;  
 and I shall be changed and be like Him,  
 when I stand on the streets of gold.

Revelation 21 assures us that the healing fruits of the tree of life will grow in a beautiful place, rich with resources to care for our needs.

## **2—THE GLORY OF THE LORD & LAMB**

As we continue reading about this heavenly city that contains the tree of life, we also see that there will be plenty of light. We see that the city will be so bright with the glory of God that there won't even be a need for the sun or moon. The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world will shine like a lamp over the heavenly city. This well-lit city of God will be a great place for the tree of life to grow its healing fruit. As people come together from all over the world, divisions and conflicts will cease. In the light of God's glory and love, the hopes and dreams of God's people will be realized and fulfilled.

Revelation 21:24-26 tells us that kings and ordinary people will also contribute to the glorious light of the heavenly city. God's holy city won't be limited to the 12 tribes of Israel. People from every nation of the world will bring their honor and worship to God, so that the glory of their praises will shine in the city too.

Of course, that human contribution to the glorious light begins here and now, as our worship of God includes prayers and actions for the healing of the nations. One of our hymns puts it this way:

For the healing of the nations, Lord, we pray with one accord;  
 for a just and equal sharing of the things that earth affords;  
 to a life of love in action help us rise and pledge our word,  
 help us rise and pledge our word.\*

Here at First United Methodist Church, we have a vision of meeting spiritual needs by developing relationships with Christ, community, *and the world*. When we dedicate our prayers, our efforts, and our

financial pledges to the international goals of God's heavenly city, we are preparing ourselves and participating already in the tree of life and God's healing fruit.

### **3—THE TREE OF LIFE**

In Revelation 22:1-5, we see that the heavenly city also has a river running through the middle of the street of gold. That river contains the water of life, and "on either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing fruit for each month." That makes me think of those Christmas gifts people sometimes send to their family and friends. Each month, a box of some kind of fruit is delivered, a different fruit each month.

Today, here in our rich United States of America, we take for granted that we can buy a variety of fruits all year round. In the winter of the northern hemisphere, we get grapes from South America and tomatoes and avocados from Mexico. In Bible times and in impoverished countries today, no such abundance has been experienced. Long seasons exist between harvests. Long periods of hunger exist between the fruits that feed and provide health for the body.

So, this revelation of John has been quite wonderful. The vision that there would be sufficient food in every month of the year has provided amazing hope and joy. Truly this would be a place and time in which God would wipe every tear from their eyes, when death would be no more, when mourning and crying and pain would be no more.

Like the twelve different gemstones, the twelve kinds of fruit were a cue in John's vision that God would be providing this heavenly and healing home for the twelve tribes of Israel. But the fact that the leaves and fruits of these trees *would heal the nations* is also rich in meaning. Just as the nations of the world would be bringing the glorious light of their worship to the holy city, so here we see that the healing leaves and fruits of the tree of life would be for the nations. While Israel certainly holds a special place in God's heart, the salvation of God is intended for everyone in the whole world. God's heavenly

plan is that there will be peace, healing, and life for all people. This is the purpose and meaning of the tree of life.

### **CONCLUSION**

OK, fine. But you might ask, “What’s that got to do with our First United Methodist pledge drive?” Well, a few things maybe. One is that, as we and our loved ones face death, our Christian faith brings us a lot of comfort. It brings us healing and restores our life. These beliefs we hold dear are taught and reinforced through our ministry here at First UMC. When we support this church financially, we support these eternal truths which give us personal spiritual strength to carry on.

Also, as our world is in turmoil, and we each think about what’s going on with wars and conflicts between various types of people, it’s important for us as Christian believers to have clear understandings about God’s goal for our world. It’s important for us to be on the side of peace and harmony, recognizing that no one group has all the rights to God’s privileges. The light of heaven comes from all nations of the globe, and the healing of God is extended to all peoples.

Our church teaches us these important and trustworthy truths that make us better Christians and better citizens of our world. And those are good reasons, I believe, to support our church financially. So, when you come up to receive holy communion this morning, I hope you will bring your 2024 pledge card. I hope you will bring your light for the healing of the nations. I hope you will pledge your support to God’s tree of life.