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*Advent Vision: The Tree of Life (Rev. 22:1-5)*

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Tonight we're talking about trees. Let me tell you about my favorite tree ever. This particular tree is on the campus of the seminary where I received my theological training, in Fort Wayne, Indiana. It's a beautiful campus, with thousands of trees. My favorite tree, though, was a gorgeous 40-foot tall ginkgo tree. Every day I'd walk past it, on the sidewalk connecting my dorm to the main campus.

The ginkgo has a distinctive, fan-shaped leaf shape, as some of you know, and they say that the ginkgo is among the most ancient of all trees. They've been on earth, human scientists say, for some 200 million years; but God only knows if that's true.

What I particularly love about ginkgo trees is that their leaves turn bright yellow in the fall, and then they suddenly lose all their leaves, within an hour or two. I happened to see this occur one fall morning in my first year at the seminary, and I just stood there, in a shower of yellow leaves. That's when that tree became my favorite tree ever. For the next couple of years, I watched the ginkgo tree carefully. I made sure that I was there when the leaves fell. I was late for class once, in fact, because I loved watching that nature show take place.

As my wife, Colleen, can attest, I've always wanted to have a ginkgo tree in my own yard; but I've never had a yard yet with space for one. Someday I'll have a ginkgo of my own!

Someday I'll see an ever greater, even more beautiful, even more remarkable tree than my favorite ginkgo tree. The Bible tells us about the tree of life. There it was in the middle of the

garden of Eden, back when God created the world and the first humans. My theory is that it was a ginkgo tree; but, of course, God only knows that, too. We do know that there was another special tree next to the tree of life, known as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God told Adam and Eve that they could eat from any tree in the whole garden, except that one special tree.

But then Adam and Eve fell into sin. They disobeyed God, and ate the forbidden fruit. So the Lord banished them from the garden, and prevented them from ever eating fruit from the tree of life again. He placed an angel and a flaming sword to guard their way back to the tree of life, as we read earlier.

The whole rest of the Bible tells the sad, tragic story of how the lives of Adam and Eve, and their whole world, were drastically changed because of their sin. God had made a perfect world, a paradise, for them, and for us. But sin corrupts. Sin destroys. Sin degrades and contaminates everything. So the world we live in today is far, far different from the world God intended for us.

The sadness and grief we experience when our loved ones die was not part of the original plan. The physical and mental diseases we suffer, and the family problems and marriage conflicts we go through, were not part of the perfect world God created. Things like poverty, homelessness, war, crime, pollution, and natural disasters were not in our world, in the beginning. Our world is still beautiful in many ways; but it's not exactly paradise, is it?

So when we read tonight about the tree of life, we have to look back with longing and regret for the way the world used to be. The tree of life in Genesis 2 reminds us that our lives today are definitely not the way God wants them to be.

But, tonight, we have to look forward, too. It's interesting how the tree of life stands sort of like bookends, on either side of the Bible. There it was in the beginning, signaling the paradise here on earth that's been lost to us. But there's the tree of life again, at the very end of the Bible, an image of paradise restored that waits for us in heaven.

In the book of Revelation, the apostle John writes about the tree of life, and about a whole series of visions that God gives him. God lets John see into heaven. John views all kinds of strange, symbolic things happening, and he writes down what he sees. And these visions aren't meant to be literal, minute-by-minute descriptions of human history, past or future. These visions of John in Revelation are designed by God to give his people on earth reassurance, when we're going through hard times.

Tonight, reading from the last chapter of the last book of the Bible, we read again about the tree of life. And what a soothing, comforting image this is for us! Now, I'm going to picture this tree as a ginkgo tree, but you can picture it as a big oak tree, a graceful Japanese maple tree, a sprawling banyan tree, or whatever tree you choose. In chapter 22, John gives us the vision of the heavenly city, with a river of crystal waters flowing down the center of the city. Standing on either side of the river, up there in heaven, John sees "... the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing," he says, "of the nations."

The reappearance of the tree of life here in Revelation helps us to see that the end, for us, will be just like the beginning, only better. God's not promising just to help us make it somehow through this life. God is promising to bring us to paradise. He's going to give us an eternal life of perfect beauty, of complete freedom from sin and all its nasty side-effects, and picture-perfect relationships with each other and

with him. In heaven, we'll all be fully healed from every stigma and shame of sin.

You know, when Jesus came from heaven down to this earth, on that first Christmas, he came to deliver God's Good News to sinners. Jesus came to teach, and preach, and heal people who were lost in their sins. But Jesus came, also, to give his life as our Savior. Jesus died on another tree, a tree of death, so that we can be forgiven, so that we can live. Jesus saved us from sin. And when we put our faith in Jesus, God promises that we'll end up in paradise. We'll see the tree of life with our own eyes, and we'll see if it really is a ginkgo tree or not.

During these days of Advent, before Christmas, try to keep John's image of the tree of life in your mind. Repent of your sin, and be sorry for the paradise that's been lost in this world. But give thanks for God's gift of his Son, Jesus, who gives us the hope and the promise of heaven. I can't wait to see the tree of life – the best tree ever -- with you! Amen.