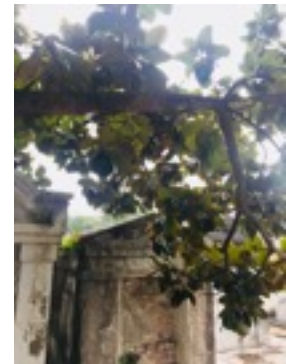


“A Tomb and a Tree”

Two weeks ago my wife and I spent a long weekend in New Orleans. We stayed in the Garden District on St. Charles Street, which by the way, was lovely. I highly recommend it if you're ever in the area. During the day, my wife attended a *Kindermusic* meeting, which meant I was free to wander the streets and take in the sights. One of the places I ended up was the Lafayette Cemetery. Established in 1844, it's an unforgettable kind of place that has this thick wall which surrounds hundreds of above ground tombs. Some of the wealthier family tombs were built of marble, but most were constructed of inexpensive plastered brick— a testament to the many Irish and German immigrants devastated by the 19th-century yellow-fever epidemics. The cemetery is a bastion of history, tragedy, and southern gothic charm. And as I explored the grounds, walking the two intersecting footpaths that form a cross, I took this picture .



I took it because this scene kind of struck me, not because I recognized the family name on the tomb, or because it was so old or even that unique. I took the picture because in that moment I saw this great contrast between life and death.

And I liked it. In fact, I liked it so much I had it printed and hung it in a little corner of our screen porch. It was a good memory and might even be a good conversation piece when friends and neighbors were over, I thought. But that was it. At least I thought that was it. You see, when I began studying our reading from Genesis chapter 15, as we continue our sermon series on Abraham, this photo caught my attention once again. I know this might seem a little strange, because if there's any image associated with what's going on in our reading, it would probably be a night sky filled with thousands of stars like Wesley showed the kids earlier. To associate an image of stars with Genesis 15 would certainly make sense. But a tomb and tree?

But I ask you think about something. Abram is alive in our reading is he not? But what was it that really made him alive in the fullest sense of the word? Was it the oxygen he was breathing in? Was it the fact that his heart was beating and blood was circulating throughout his body? Sure, those things were certainly evidence of life. But when God's

people ponder life and just what that means, what really makes them alive in the fullest sense, is God's word of promise. That was certainly the case for Abram.

"Do not be afraid," the Lord tells him. "I am your shield, your reward will be great." It's a promise that Abram's life would be protected forever. It's a promise that the gift of life in the form of offspring as numerous as the stars would be his. For Abram, God's word of promise was nothing less than life as God intended. But this wasn't enough for Abram at the moment. God told him the way things were and the way things were to be. But Abram could only think about the way things were and the way things were to be from his perspective. Yes, he and Sarai were still childless, but God promised him offspring. And yet God's word of promise was not enough. So Abram started to scheme and formulate a plan of his own. Why? Because that's what sinners do. They doubt God's word of promise and start trying to solve things with their own words and their own plans. "O Lord God, I'm still childless," Abram cried. "What will you give me because so far it's nothing!" I guess the only way for me to solve this thing is to make my servant Eliezer my heir.

You see at this point, Abram might have been breathing with blood circulating throughout his body, but he was as good as dead. He doubts he will ever be a father. He doubts his situation. In essence, he doubts the very word of God. His faith in God's promises, it seems, was gone. Abram had "closed himself up in the tomb," separating himself from all that was good.

At this point, I think it's fairly easy to see how much we have in common with this man, isn't it? We too have been given God's word of promise. We too have been given his blessing without any worthiness on our part and outside of anything we have to offer. But truth be told, we still doubt it. We still formulate our own plans and schemes. We still claim "life isn't fair, Lord" and cry out, "What will you give me because so far all I see is a marriage that could fail at any moment, a crappy job, a terminally ill parent, and a stack of bills a mile high! I guess the only way I can solve all this is to do it on my own. We all do it in one way or another. But do it enough and it's a very real way walking away from God—a way of closing ourselves up in the tomb, separating ourselves from all that is good.

Doubt plaques us. And this, my friends, is Satan's "go to" weapon. We've all heard the old saying, the devil made me do it when it comes to sin, but the truth is the devil first and foremost tempts us to doubt the very word of God. Did God really love the world so much that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but

have eternal life? Does baptism really save? Is Jesus really present in the bread and wine of Holy Communion for the forgiveness of our sins? This is the same kind of doubt Abram experienced. But God would have nothing to do with it. His word came to Abram. “Your servant wont be your heir,” he says—“your very own son will.” And then God leads Abram out into the darkness and tells him to look up at the stars and start counting. “Number the stars, if you are able, Abram. So shall your offspring be.” And in one of the most dynamic turns in the entire Bible we are told that, “Abram believed the Lord.” He trusts in the promise. He who doubted hears again God’s word and believes it! And it is by this faith, this simple faith in his word of promise that God declares Abram to be righteous. Nothing depended on Abram here—he was metaphorically in the tomb remember? It all depended on what God said, on his word of promise.

And the same is true for you and me. God is the only one “who gives life to the dead,” which is the free gift of his grace through faith in Christ. That’s why this image was so powerful to me in relation to the story. In the tree I saw the one thing was alive and good. In the tree, I saw the shield that keeps the dead out of the tomb. In the tree, I saw the essence of bringing into existence a new reality. Because in the tree I saw the one who was nailed to a cold lifeless tree on a hill outside of Jerusalem, only to be raised by God the Father as leader and Savior to all to give repentance and forgiveness of sins. In the tree I saw the culmination of God’s word of promise because I saw life!

“Abraham “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.” So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham,” Paul writes to the Galatians. And you know what? He might as well have addressed these words to the *Wake Forestians* because this is us!

“The righteous shall live by faith.” “For by grace we have been saved through faith. “We have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us. And the life we now live in the flesh we live by faith in the Son of God. Faith in the one who has washed us in the waters of holy baptism and comes to us in his supper. Faith in the one who remains forever.

Christ has entered the tomb, the prison of our fallen world (photo) and has set us free. And if the Son sets us free, we will be free indeed, Jesus says. Not free to do whatever we want or free to scheme in whatever ways we can when things don't go your way. But

by the miraculous working of God's promises, we who believe in Christ are free to live in this one story of faith which has no end.

Are you breathing? Is your heart beating and blood circulating throughout your body? But are you truly alive? Take one last look at the tomb and the tree and know that God's word of promise means life in the fullest sense of the word today and forever. **Amen.**