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“That Awful Tree”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

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Psalm 118: 19-29; Matthew 21: 1-11, Matthew 26: -27:66

As some of you may know, I am a tree hugger.

I am a tree hugger from childhood days, when I was both tomboy
and tree climber.

My earliest memories of tree hugging stem from the stately Magnolia
in my grandmother’s back yard.

It’s low branches made an accessible
hand-over-hand stairway to heaven;

a Jacob’s ladder, ascending higher and higher,

according to the degree of difficulty to which I aspired.

It’s red-speckled grenade-like seed pods could easily be lobbed
on unsuspecting victims below.

And the preeminent danger seemed to be the velvety sheaths of seed cover,
which could easily flake off and fall into your eyes as you were
looking skyward while ascending.

That Magnolia tree was my initial venture into tree hugging.

But my hugging tree-of-choice to date is the Ginkgo.

I’m a hugger of Ginkgoes, just as Robert Frost once described himself

as a swinger of Birches.

“So was I once myself a swinger of birches,” Frost says,

“and so I dream of going back to be...

One could do worse than be a swinger of Birches.” (*Birches*).

The Gingko is an ancient species,

a living fossil dating back 270 million years.

Introduced to North America from China, it is virtually indestructible,

resistant to disease, some living up to more than 2,500 years old.

It is called “dioecious”, with separate trees being male,

and others being the seed-bearing female.

My favorite Gingko tree is in Charlotte, on the Queens University campus.

The oldest Gingko tree in North Carolina is in God’s Acre,

the Moravian grave yard in Old Salem.

I check on them all from time to time, to see how they are faring

in these days of global warming and climate change.

My favorite Gingko time is the brief 4-5 days in the fall, right after the first

frost,

when all their leaves turn bright yellow at once, and

fall as a gold blanket beneath the tree.

That’s when I want to hug them the most.

I’m a tree hugger,

but “that awful tree” is one I’m loathe to hug.

How do we begin to wrap our arms around that awful tree, the cross:

that stark instrument of torture, that shames the dying

by exposing their nearly naked bodies,

and their nearly naked emotions?

How do we begin to embrace something that makes us so... uncomfortable?

Every year, at this time, we come to Holy Week,

and hear and relive the horrible down-hill saga of Jesus'

slide from triumphal entry into Jerusalem,

to the hollow recesses of the tomb, within one short week.

We'll read the story today from Matthew's gospel:

the hosanna loud hosanna processional; the last supper;

the garden prayer; the denial by Peter;

the interrogation before Pilate;

the mockery and flogging; the awful tree;

the awful abandonment; the awful death.

How do we wrap our arms around that awful tree?

The cross has no footholds to speak of.

It has no low branch accessibility.

No seed pods for lobbing.

No bird's eye view of the vistas below.

It's full of splinters, purposefully.

It's meant to hurt, not to hug.

So why would anyone in his or her right mind

want to embrace and hug that awful tree upon which Jesus hung?

Because - the incarnation of God in human form, the Word made flesh,

God with us, Immanuel, is made complete there, in Jesus Christ,

throned upon that awful tree.

Just as we affirm at funerals that our baptism is made complete in our death,

so, too, is the incarnation of God made complete in Jesus, upon the

cross.

“The cross places suffering at the heart of God’s character
and at the heart of meaningful human life,”

says Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann.

(Walter Brueggemann. “Editor’s Forward,” Charles B. Cousar, *A Theology of the Cross*. viii.)

God can not be fully with us, or fully for us, unless God becomes fully like us,

from cradle to grave, and that must include suffering
our most unimaginable pains.

In Jesus Christ, God was there, dying on that awful tree,

meeting us at our human crosses, our points of deepest need.

That awful tree is where God meets a lone immigrant lying in a hospice bed,
half a world away from his family.

That awful tree is where God meets the families

of two murdered college students, grieving their untimely deaths.

That awful tree is where God meets the young parents of a stillborn child,
trying to be hopeful once more.

That awful tree is where God meets the family of a suicide victim,

left with the baggage of incompleteness and guilt.

That awful tree is where God meets each of us in our sinfulness,

in words we wish we could take back,

in actions we deeply regret, not condemning, but forgiving.

That awful tree is where God embraces each of us in our full humanity,

and that is why we must now embrace Jesus at his darkest hour:

bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh,

image of our image, and of God’s,

God with us, even there, even here.

Upon that awful tree, in the gloom, God is nigh, the hymn says.

Listen now to the uncomfortable story of God's love made flesh:

a man, a son, an awful tree where God reaches down to embrace us
with unimaginable compassion and hope. Listen.