

“God & Trees”
Deuteronomy 20:19-20
October 5, 2025
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We continue this morning in the Book of Deuteronomy, as Moses instructs God’s people about how they are to live in the land.

We’re in a section of Deuteronomy on how Israel is to conduct war. And it’s in that section that we come to our text this morning: Deuteronomy 20:19-20.

As we hear from it, please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Moses said to the people:

^{20:19} “When you besiege a city for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. You may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down. Are the trees in the field human, that they should be besieged by you? ²⁰ Only the trees that you know are not trees for food you may destroy and cut down, that you may build siegeworks against the city that makes war with you, until it falls.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, take not your word of truth from our lips,
for we know that our hope is in your revelation spoken to us.
Help us to keep your commands continually,
to walk in your ways in all areas of life,
to speak your truth to the people and the powers around us,
to find our delight in your testimony to us,
and to love your revelation to us.
Grant this now as we turn to your word together,
and all the days of our lives.
In Jesus name, Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:41,43-47]

Introduction

Today’s sermon is going to be about trees.

Which is a little strange.

But here at Faith, we preach through whole books of the Bible. We go section by section. We don't skip portions of a book we're going through in the Bible or just hit the parts we like best.

And that means we will spend time on topics that we may not think are important enough to speak to from the pulpit ... but that God thinks are important enough to speak to from the pulpit.

And so whether you think the topic is worthy of a sermon or unworthy of one – it's God who calls our attention to this topic today, as we work our way through the book of Deuteronomy.

And as he does, we need to recognize that what God has to say will not fit neatly into any kind of partisan box. My job, this morning, is not to push any earthly cultural or political perspective. My job is to try to expound and apply what our text and what the Scriptures as a whole have to say about how we treat and how we view trees and the natural world.

Some of you, I suspect, are hoping to fit the sermon into a cultural and political box you already agree with, so that you can take this passage perhaps as an overall endorsement of your favorite secular political platform.

Others of you, I suspect, may be hoping to fit this sermon into your opponent's political platform so that you can maybe dismiss the sermon as a reflection of your pastor's personal politics, instead of dealing with it as an exposition and application of God's Word.

But the truth is, that when it comes to how we relate to creation – to the natural world – even to trees – what the Bible has to say is not just a Christianized version of what the secular left or the secular right teaches. While we tend to want to split everything into that dichotomy, the Bible refuses to submit to our secular political categories. It has its own teaching on creation and nature. And rightly understood, the Bible's teaching on creation and the natural world will make both the secular left and the secular right uncomfortable.

Consider first the secular left.

While the secular left often calls on us to value creation, and make sacrifices for the wellbeing of the natural world, it often struggles to explain why we should value creation, or make sacrifices for it.

Then, when it does try to give a reason for why the natural world is objectively valuable, beyond its immediate utility, those explanations can quickly veer into pantheistic spiritualization's of nature that cannot be supported outside of the assumptions of a quasi-pagan worldview.

Third, for many on the secular left (though certainly not all), environmentalism can often be performative rather than truly helpful – focused on visible action that feels good for the person who does it, but that has little impact, or sometimes even a negative impact, on the environment overall.

Finally, too often environmental suggestions and policies from the secular left are economically regressive and insensitive to the poor – placing undue financial burdens and consequences on those who can least afford them.

On each of these counts, the Bible has real, and serious critiques of how the secular left in our culture so often approaches the question of how we should relate to creation and the natural world.

That said ... the Bible also has serious critiques for how the secular right often approaches this issue.

For one thing, the secular right's stance on issues related to creation and the environment is often needlessly reactionary. It often seems that it's primarily because their political opponents are concerned about caring for the natural world that some on the secular right are determined to be utterly unconcerned about it – or even antagonistic to it. That is not a mature or wise way to establish a moral position in the world.

Second, the secular right has a tendency to view creation and nature only for its utility – to see the natural world as merely raw material, with no inherent meaning of its own.

Third, the secular right too often tends to value economic concerns over environmental concerns, and the short-term benefits of how we make use of natural resources over long-term consequences.

Finally, when it comes to environmental concerns, the secular right is often prone to arrogance, assuming that we can control the forces of nature, and mitigate the effects of any interventions we choose to make in it, rather than approaching creation with humility.

On each of these counts, the Bible has real and serious critiques of how the secular right in our culture so often approaches the question of how we should relate to creation and the natural world.

All of which is to say the Bible doesn't neatly fit into the tidy boxes of the secular political dichotomy that so often dominates our culture.

And so, instead of trying to force this passage, or the Bible's teaching on this topic as a whole, into the rigid boxes of our secular culture, we need to let the Bible speak to us on its own terms.

And when we do ... what do we hear?

Well ... I would argue that as we look at this passage, what we see is that though we are often careless with elements of God's creation, like trees, we should approach them instead with care, because God cares about them, God speaks through them, God provides through them, and God has made them central to our story.

Let me say that again: Though we are often careless with elements of God's creation, like trees, we should approach them instead with care, because God cares about them, God speaks through them, God provides through them, and God has made them central to our story.

There's a lot there. Let's walk through that statement now together.

We Are Often Careless with Elements of God's Creation, Like Trees

First, we are often careless with elements of God's creation, like trees.

And we see this first in our text. What God tells Israel not to do in verse 19 is something that was common in the ancient world [Wright, 230].

The ancient Egyptians, for example, were known for leaving no tree standing in a land they had attacked, hacking them down as they went through enemy territory. [Brown, 202] The Assyrians and other military powers in the Ancient Near East were known for similar practices of destroying the natural world in lands they conquered. [Brown, 202; Craige, 276; Millar, 133]

And that carelessness and even antagonism towards the natural world in the land of our military opponents continues in the modern world. Even now, countries at war so often seek to bring devastation not just on another country's military, but on their civilian infrastructure, and on the ecology of the land itself – something this text tells us displeases God. [Brown, 200-201; Wright, 230]

But this destructive approach to creation is often not limited to how we conduct ourselves in war. We can often take the same approach in how we treat the natural world in our own country, and even our own communities.

We can do this as a society when we enact policies that harm creation without sufficient cause – simply because it's convenient. And we can do this in our communities, or through our jobs, or in our personal lives, when we harm creation in selfish, foolish, or short-sighted ways.

That can be a little abstract. But maybe, like our text, it's helpful to start with something more concrete.

J.R.R. Tolkien, author of *The Lord of the Rings*, was sensitive to this in very concrete ways. He once wrote: "I find human maltreatment of [trees] as hard to bear as some find ill-treatment of animals." [Tolkien, 220].

"Every tree has its enemy," he wrote, "few have an advocate." And after writing about the passion with which some people want to see trees cut down in general, or one specific tree in their life eliminated in particular, Tolkien wrote that "Too often the hate [towards such trees] is irrational, a fear of anything large and alive, and not easily tamed or destroyed, though it may clothe itself in pseudo-rational terms." [Tolkien, 321]

Such irrational hate of creation in general, and trees specifically, was common in the ancient world when it came to the land of one's enemies, and God here forbids it.

But there are also many relevant stories not just of malevolence, but of carelessness or indifference towards elements of the natural world, like trees.

In the summer of 1964, a graduate student named Donald Rusk Currey asked the Forest Service for permission to cut down a tree in eastern Nevada. Now, two stories are told about why he wanted to cut the tree down. One is that he had tried to take a core sample of the tree as part of his research, and he had lost his drill bit in the tree's trunk. And so he asked for permission to cut the tree down to get his drill bit back. The other story is that he got a core from the tree, but he couldn't tell how old the tree was from that with enough accuracy ... so he wanted to cut the tree down to better determine its age. In either case, the Forest Service approved his request. He cut the tree down and brought a sample back to his hotel room. There, as he studied it, Donald Currey discovered that he had just killed the oldest living organism known to humanity. The tree was determined to be at

least 4,862 years old – though later researchers argued it was likely over 5,000 years old, which made it, at the time, the world’s oldest known non-clonal organism. [See bibliography for sources.]

For some perspective: This tree was already 700 years old when the Old Testament patriarch Abraham was born. And Donald Currey killed it ... for another data point in his graduate research ... or to retrieve a drill bit.

Such stories ... can almost hit us in the gut. They strike us as a tragedy. As I’ve heard one Christian poet put it – on a deep level it strikes us that there’s something orc-like in such behavior.

But why? Why do we care?

After all ... it’s just a tree.

Even if it’s very old, why should we care about such things?

Well, let’s consider a few reasons given to us in our text and in the Bible.

Because God Cares for Them

First, we see here that we should approach elements of God’s creation, like trees, with care, because God cares about them.

God almost seems to be pleading with the people in verse 19. We read: “Are the trees in the field human, that they should be besieged by you?”

God cares about the trees. God is concerned about the trees. God doesn’t want people to unnecessarily harm or cut down the trees.

It’s a reminder to us that God made this world. And God loves what he has made. He delights in it. He thinks the things he has made are wonderful. And he cares about what happens to them.

And if God loves those things – if he delights in them ... then that, all by itself, should be enough reason for us to care for them too.

It’s really just an extension of the first great commandment. If we love God, then we should love what God loves. What he thinks about the world we live in should be really important to us.

Is it?

When you look at something out in the world – some particular object ... do you care more about what you think of it ... or what God thinks of it? And is God caring about it enough reason for you to care about it?

However, you may feel about the created, natural world, God loves it. He cares about it. And for that reason alone, we should care about it too.

So first, we should care for creation, and the things God has made, because God cares about them.

Because God Speaks Through Them

Second, the Bible tells us that we should approach elements of God's creation, like trees, with care, not only because God himself cares about them, but also because God speaks through them.

The Apostle Paul, in Romans 1, and King David, in Psalm 19, both tell us that God speaks not only through his written word – through the Scriptures – but also through creation – through the world he has made. And he speaks through creation primarily about himself. [Romans 1:19-20; Psalm 19:1-4]

Creation tells us about who God is. God spoke creation into existence, and his words, which came from his mind, took the form of the created world, in such a way that Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck could say that “The world” – creation, nature – “is an embodiment of the thoughts of God.” [Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1.208]

The world around us is not just stuff. It's not just useful raw materials. It's speech. It's communication. The world is full of pictures that tell us about what God is like – that make visible the invisible attributes of God. The sea shows us his vastness, his depth, his power. The sun shows us his light and warmth. The flowers show us his beauty. Trees show us how God is ancient, yet alive, sturdy and strong, beautiful and practical, providing us the shade we need at noon, the food we need each day, the air we need each moment. In these way and more, they speak about God – they show forth what God is like.

As one writer puts it: “Matter is never just matter. Dirt is never just dirt, butterflies are never just butterflies, and flesh is never just flesh. All were created by God. As such, all communicate something about God. Everything in the universe – every star, every tree, every body – proclaims some truth about its Maker. They are all [...] a metaphor. They are all a revelation. Every atom in the universe is pregnant with mystery, pregnant with grace, capable of helping man discover the truth about himself and God.” [Stimpson, 14-15]¹

Creation in general, and each element of nature in particular, speaks of God. And so, we should approach the natural world, and the elements within it with care. Because God speaks to us through them.

¹ Stephen Grabill, a theologian at Calvin College, expresses the same idea as this – he encourages us to consider, as an example, fire. “Why do we have it?” he asks. And then he answers: “For warmth, to cook, but also, fire is used time and time again to tell us something about God. He is dangerous, he purifies, he enlightens.” Grabill's point seems to be that the world gives us a metaphor. But, he says, “with one very important difference: God isn't like fire. Fire is like God. There is something in fire that tells us about God. There is something [in] trees that tell us about God. In fact, when we look at everything in the world we can not only see into it, but we can see along it.” Grabill then continues to make his point by quoting from the Christian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins:

“I do not know that I have ever seen anything more beautiful than the bluebell [flower] I have been looking at. I know the beauty of our Lord by it. The world then is word, expression, news of God. Therefore, its end, its purpose, its purport, its meaning, is God. And its life or work to name and praise him. The world is charged with the grandeur of God. The creation *does* praise him, *does* reflect honor on him, *is* of service to him. The sun and the stars shining, glorify God, *they* stand where he placed them, *they* move where he bid them. The heavens declare the glory of God, the birds sing to him, the thunder speaks of his terror, the lion is like his strength, the sea is like his greatness, the honey like his sweetness, *they are* something like him. *They* make him known. *They* tell of him. For Christ plays in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his, to the Father, through the features of men's faces.” [Grabill]

Because God Provides Through Them

Third, we should approach elements of God's creation, like trees, with care, because God provides through them.

In addition to all this, God gives us trees to provide for us and for others. And we see this in our text.

Moses gives special care in verse 20 to fruit trees, because by them God intends to provide food to his creatures. And we're not supposed to spurn or destroy the means by which God provides for us and for others.

Then, later on in verse 20, even when non-fruit trees are allowed to be cut down, Moses gives specific directions that they cannot be cut down out of vindictiveness, or out of convenience, or to meet trivial needs or desires, but for specific needs of the people in that time and place. [Craigie, 277] God places clear restrictions on this.

What do we take from that?

Trees can, of course, be cut down – and we are called on to make use of the wood they provide us. God has given them to us as a gift to provide the materials we need to build homes and other things, or to provide firewood in order to keep warm. These are not bad uses of trees at all, but good uses – uses affirmed throughout the Scriptures. We are called to fell trees to meet a range of needs.

But such use is to be done with care. We are to have a purpose – and a purpose worthy of whatever destruction is entailed. We're not to be careless or gratuitous in our consumption or destruction of nature.

Because God provides for us not only when we take part of the natural world and transform it onto something else, as wonderful as that is ... he also provides for us through the ongoing health and existence of the natural world.

And so, we don't just need the wood that felled trees provide, but we also depend on the food, and even the oxygen, and more, that healthy and living trees give us. We depend on them, literally with every breath.

And that dependence on God's ongoing provision through the living and healthy natural world extends beyond us, into the future. Our children, and our grandchildren, and great grandchildren after us will depend on the health of the natural world God has made – as a means through which he provides for them. Christians of all people should appreciate that we are called to be stewards of that gift so that future generations can enjoy it, rather than selfishly plundering it for ourselves now in ways that will damage it for future generations.

And so, the call to care for creation – to keep it healthy – is really just an extension of the second great commandment: to love our neighbor as ourselves. By caring for creation, we love not just our neighbor next door ... but the neighbor who will come after us. [Brown, 200].

Christians should care about using natural resources when they need to be used: responsible logging, building, woodworking, and land development are often essential to human flourishing. Christians should also care about preserving natural resources when they need to be preserved, standing up against human selfishness when it seeks to do unnecessary damage to the world God has given us.

Christians, of all people, should know that humanity was originally called to be gardeners of creation – not plunderers or passive bystanders. Because through the natural world, God provides for us and blesses us and others.

God has placed us in this world. It's a world which he loves. It's a world which reveals, in a myriad of ways, what he himself is like – a world that speaks in mysterious ways about him. And it's a world through which he provides for us so much of what we need: air to breathe, water to drink, food to eat, fire to keep warm, materials to build and create with.

All around us, everywhere we look, in every rock, in every tree, in every bird, in everything, is God's treasure, God's communication, God's provision. These riches are all around us – do we see them for what they are? Or are we more often blind to their value ... careless about them ... grasping from it what we want in the moment, and otherwise ignoring them?

Christians – God's people – are to be a people who care about his creation – about the world he has given us and made us stewards of. It should shape how we view the natural world. It should shape how we behave towards the world ourselves. It should shape our politics. It should shape our economics. Exactly how it should shape each of those things is something we each need to wrestle with. But for now, we at least need to recognize that it should shape all those things. Because God cares about the natural world he's made. He speaks through the natural world he's made. And he provides for his creatures through the natural world he's made.

Because God Has Made Them Central to Our Story

But then, on top of all that, he's also woven the natural world in general, and trees in particular, into even things so high and lofty as our eternal relationship with him.

Here's what I mean.

Trees are actually central to the biblical story.

The Bible tells us that when God created humanity – when he made our First Parents, he placed them in a garden, and he gave them everything they needed.

And then, in the center of that garden, he placed two special trees. And how our First Parents related to those trees would shape their eternal relationship with God, and the fate of humanity.

One was the tree of life: a gift to humanity, by which God would share his eternal life with us.

The other tree was a tree that, at least for a time, God had withheld from our First Parents. He told them they could eat from every tree of all of creation ... except that one. Every other tree and all its fruit was a gift to humanity. But that one tree was not a gift for us – at least not yet.

And so he placed these two special trees in the garden. And he called our First Parents to be faithful.

But instead of simply receiving the gifts he had given with thanksgiving ... instead of being faithful gardeners who honored the wishes of their King ... they instead became thieves and plunderers – grasping at and seizing the one thing God had not given to them: taking and eating from the one tree that was forbidden to them.

And with that, they ushered brokenness and death into God’s good world. Humanity’s relationship with its Maker was tarnished. We had become thieves. We were expelled from the garden, and we continued in our sin and rebellion.

And as a consequence of our stealing from that one special tree, we were cut off from the other special tree as well – the tree of life. That tree, whose fruit we so desperately needed, we were cut off from, because of our sin. And on some level, we each still long for the life-giving fruit and the healing leaves of that tree of life, long after we were exiled from its presence.

And so, humanity went its own way. And sin, and brokenness, and death ensued.

But the story would not end there.

Instead, God would bring another tree into the story.

In the fullness of time, God himself would come to humanity. In the person of Jesus Christ, he would seek us after we had left him, he would tell us about himself, he would show us what he is like, he would pursue us in love and grace.

And then, to complete his work on earth, he would receive the penalty for our sin that we deserved. He would pay the debt we owed before God which we ourselves could not pay. And he would do that by being nailed upon a tree. He would do that by dying upon a tree.

Just as we fell from grace by a tree, God chose to redeem us by a tree, in the death of Jesus Christ. [Acts 5:30, 10:39, 13:29; Galatians 3:13; 1 Peter 2:24]

Then, on the third day, Jesus rose from the dead. And he promised that all who would call on him in faith would be saved – would be forgiven of all our sin, including our sins against God’s creation – because he died for us on that tree. And with that promise, he ascended into heaven.

But Jesus also promised more than forgiveness. He promised that one day he would return. And when he does, all who had pledged themselves to him – all who had called on him by faith – all who had trusted in his work for them when he died upon the tree – all his people he will raise from the dead, to live forever with him, in a new heaven and a new earth – a renewed creation, freed from sin and sadness, from pain and death.

And we’re told in the Book of Revelation, in the very last chapters of the Bible, that in that garden city, where God would dwell with his people ... there would be, once again, the tree of life. And it would bear its fruit for the life of God’s people. And its leaves would be for the healing of the nations. [Revelation 22:1-5]

This is the story we live in. A story of trees: from the Garden, to the Cross, to the City of God.

And I can't help but wonder ... if God has filled the world with trees the way he has, in part, to remind us, every day, on some deep level, maybe even below the level of consciousness, of this story. And maybe that has something to do with both our wonder ... and at times our antagonism ... towards the trees all around us.

God calls us to care for the natural world he has given us – including the trees – because he cares for them. By them he provides for us. By them he speaks to us. And by them he reminds us of the story we live in: A story of rebellion, redemption, and restoration, with a tree at the heart of each stage.

And so, brothers and sisters, since God has so honored his creation, let us honor it as well as we remember the story it points us to, and as we seek to love God and love our neighbor, by being faithful gardeners and stewards of the world God has made.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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- Theopolis Podcast. “Episode 685: Wars and Just Wars (Deuteronomy 20)” November 15, 2023.
<https://soundcloud.com/user-812874628/episode-685-wars-and-just-wars-deuteronomy-20>
- Theopolis Podcast: “Episode 796: Trees and Fruit (Psalm 1:3), with Brian Moats” June 18, 2025.
<https://soundcloud.com/user-812874628/episode-796-trees-and-fruit-psalm-13-with-brian-moats>
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Edited by Humphry Carpenter, with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.
- Wright, Christopher. *Deuteronomy*. NIBC. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996.

On the Story of the Oldest Known Tree:

- <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/how-one-researcher-accidentally-killed-one-of-the-oldest-trees-in-the-world-125764872/>
- <https://www.terrain.org/essays/14/cohen.htm>
- <https://www.nps.gov/grba/learn/historyculture/the-prometheus-story.htm>
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prometheus_\(tree\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prometheus_(tree))

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of “Reformed Catholicity”), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.