

## The Peoria Tree of Life

I want to thank you for your support of this work. So above my head is a painting and above the front door is a stained glass panel. It was part of the deal that I made with Pastor Joyce that she allowed me to speak to you today. I'm going to read this the best that I can so that you can have this as part of the record. This isn't the first time I've made this kind of arrangement and the reason why is that it gives me a chance to tell you a little bit about what we've tried to do.

I remember talking with Lynette about this in the beginning and she remarked to me something like this, she "should have known better than to think this would be an in and out weekend kind of thing." But Lynette and Pastor Joyce and all of you have had the faith to see something larger happen and I have to tell you that it's been a source of great pleasure to me to be a part of it and I hope that far into the future this will continue to be a blessing to you and those who will see these things.

In the Bible there is the phrase "the apple of my eye" which suggests something, or someone, that is precious to us or to the Lord. I think it's used five times. First in Deuteronomy to refer to people of Jacob whom He found in a desert land, in a "waste howling wilderness" (Deut. 32.9-10). Later, in the Psalms, there is this beautiful language that pleads that God would keep David as the "apple of his eye, hidden in the shadow of His wings." It might do you some good to look up the other references.

But let me tell you a little bit about apple trees, one of which is part of the inspiration behind this painting. When I was young our neighbors had apple trees that grew around the foundation of their home. The fruit from the trees was small and green and sour. I think you'd call them "granny apples".

They were a very tempting target for little pirate children like myself who saw an opportunity to make the easy climb up their short little trunks, that would even allow us to climb on our neighbor's roof and get ever better access to the apples higher in their trees. I remember sitting on the large propane tank that sat along our property line parallel to our neighbor's. We

were like little vultures waiting for a chance to strike. And we did. And so I call these trees, “the trees of knowledge” because I learned that property lines mean something and climbing on other people's roofs to get apples isn't a universal right.

We roamed quite a bit around our rural home. About a ½ mile down the road was a creek where we could fish and hike and where as long as we didn't disturb the cattle or otherwise cause trouble, we could explore. There were interesting bugs, birds, animals, fish and trees. For a young man it was paradise despite mosquito bites, allergies, and poisonous weeds. But there were wondrous sights to behold and in the heat of the summer there was a very comforting shade along cool waters. I can remember that kind of day particularly because I had my sketch book open while I sat on the roots of an old tree drawing the rusty iron truss bridge that spanned across the creek.

One day I wondered a little ways away from the creek and found a magnificent apple tree that had produced a large and deliciously sweet fruit, that was pure and clear of any kind of corrupting worms and defects. I was impressed by how this tree owned its surroundings. Someone had obviously cared for this tree, but they weren't able for some reason to harvest the fruit.

There was no need to climb on the neighbor's roof. The apples hung within my easy reach. This is was my tree of life and you could say “the apple of my eye”. This whole, great, apple tree.

Things change of course as we grow from precocious innocence, through the difficulties of understanding who we are as an individual, to becoming an accountable and responsible adult, but a constant part of that process, a thread that has wound itself through my life, is the ideal form of this very place in my childhood memory.

It may be possible for you, too, to conjure up an image of your own. Maybe it is something similar, maybe it's different. I've certainly done some editing of important details. But the similarity isn't in the exact place, it's in the feelings associated with it. There will be images there in your mind as there has been in my mind, it just takes a little bit of practice.

Now, there are a lot of things about this painting and the imagery of it that will totally pass you by and there are generations that will not see them either. We'll look, but we will not see, at least not see everything. And I'll tell you that there are things that I have not yet seen in this painting even though they were put there consciously. You might wonder how it was possible for me to do that.

The answer is that often inspiration will come to me through a part of my brain that cannot immediately process itself into words, or even insight, without some time to pass first. So the other part of me often has to have a little bit of faith to wait and see what will come of the marks I make. I must have had a lobotomy when I was young and nobody told me about it. Or, maybe it's just the natural condition for everyone.

Each week you have the chance to come here, and you'll see this painting. In time, it will sink into the background of your worship experience as it should. Then every once in a while it will pop out at you with a sudden burst of awareness. Maybe you'll see how the branches spread, not only from left to right but also from the back to the front to fill this entire room. That was meant to show how all of you sitting here were meant to be included in the shade of the tree and within reach of the fruit along with everyone who is composed there above us. No one is excluded for any reason who is within sight of it.

On a sunny day, you'll look back to the stained glass, to see the crystals cast rainbows into the room. That was meant to show you that what you feel in your heart is light and it is beautiful and it comes through the fruit.

Perhaps there will be a time you'll look and you see that the Tree is a gathering place and you'll notice all around the words and symbols that remind that this gathering place should be holy because, "God is here and about". Yahweh Shammah.

This is a lesson I learned a long time ago on the sacred ground of the Sioux Indians of South Dakota, in the Black Hills and on Bear Butte. God reaches

towards us, and he respects our efforts to “feel after him, if perchance we may find Him” whatever our beliefs, God is no respecter of persons. He desires to comfort those who mourn, to bless the peacemakers, and those who have been persecuted for his name's sake. He wants to lift us up a little bit more from our present station so we can be better and see further with more clarity.

Someday you might see that there is a rope tied to a ring. The rope stretches into the water and you can see a bluejay sitting there on it, but you can't see the boat since it's not in the picture. This was meant to remind you of the waters as they go down stream to become a part of a river basin that becomes deeper and wider the further you go. So wide and deep you could hardly swim across it. You'll know someday that will remind you of the healing power of God on the land, and in our hearts and the words of Ezekiel

AFTERWARD he brought me again unto the <sup>a</sup>door of the house; and, behold, <sup>b</sup>waters issued out from under the threshold of the house eastward: for the forefront of the house *stood toward* the east, and the waters came down from under from the right side of the <sup>c</sup>house, at the south *side* of the altar.

2 Then brought he me out of the way of the gate northward, and led me about the way without unto the utter <sup>a</sup>gate by the way that looketh eastward; and, behold, there ran out waters on the right side.

3 And when the man that had the <sup>a</sup>line in his hand went forth eastward, he measured a thousand cubits, and he brought me through the waters; the waters *were* to the ankles.

4 Again he measured a thousand, and brought me through the waters; the waters *were* to the knees. Again he measured a thousand, and brought me through; the waters *were* to the loins.

5 Afterward he measured a thousand; *and it was* a river that I could not pass over: for the waters were risen, waters to swim in, a river that could not be passed over.

6 ¶ And he said unto me, Son of man, hast thou seen *this*? Then he brought me, and caused me to return to the brink of the river.

7 Now when I had returned, behold, at the bank of the river *were* very many trees on the one side and on the other.

8 Then said he unto me, These waters issue out toward the east country, and

go down into the desert, and go into the <sup>a</sup>sea: *which being* brought forth into the sea, the <sup>b</sup>waters shall be healed.

(Old Testament | Ezekiel 47:1 - 8)

You can see the need for a boat.

I promised I would keep my time to 20 minutes. So let me just make one final observation. Families are not perfect. Congregations are not perfect. There's an ongoing need to seek out the Lord, to renew our relationship to Him and to each other. And while I am a Latter-Day Saint, a Mormon, I share this in common with you. I am a disciple of Jesus Christ and I desire the fellowship of my brother and sisters with whom I am bound together. But I'll tell you, and they'll tell you, I can be a trial of faith to them and a royal pain in the rear. (I've learned to apologize often.) They'll say that more nicely. I've got some humbling and refining to go through. I'm sure I'm not the only one. You don't need to raise your hands.

But I'm grateful they welcome me back each week, shake my hand and smile and offer me a place to sit with them under the shade of the tree near the cool water. In reaching out to another, it seems to me that I become a part of the very wood and fiber of the tree itself, joining with others who also become branches and leaves who each in their own time bring forth a most delicious fruit.

These thoughts, and more if I could, I leave with you, and the blessings of the Almighty God upon you. Amen and thank you.

