

**“Face to Face”; Series: Summer Trees**  
Revelation 22:1-5  
Westside Fellowship CRC; 9 September 2018  
Rev. Heidi S. De Jonge

Two weeks ago, I preached from a text that serves as a backdrop to Revelation 22... Ezekiel 47 and Ezekiel’s vision of the river of life coming from the foundation of the temple as a tiny trickle that leads to this life giving, uncrossable river. And we talked about how change and transformation start small, but then lead to life. There are resonances between Ezekiel 47 and Revelation 22, for sure... but there is another text in the background of Revelation 22, and that is an even earlier backdrop – the backdrop of Genesis and the trees of Genesis 2 and 3. The backdrop of the beginning...

In the beginning, there was a river... a river flowing from and nourishing the garden of Eden. And in the beginning, there was a Tree of Life in the middle of the garden of Eden. But there was also another tree – the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Adam and Eve were blessed to eat from the Tree of Life – and all the other trees in the garden, for that matter... but they were not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. As we know, Adam and Eve *did* eat from that tree, and subsequently, all things fell apart.

Now, there are all sorts of ways to read and understand what happened in Genesis 2 and 3. Here is one way that I read of in preparing for this message, which fits in with other ways that God has been getting through to me in these last couple of weeks. So, when God told Adam and Eve not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, God wasn’t being mean. God had created the world in such a way that a delicate thread of trust was woven through all of God’s creation... and this Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil - and the invitation to *not* take of it, was an invitation to trust God – to trust that God’s word and love were dependable... and in that trust there was a connection between God and human beings – a purity of reflection between God and the people that God had made in God’s image.

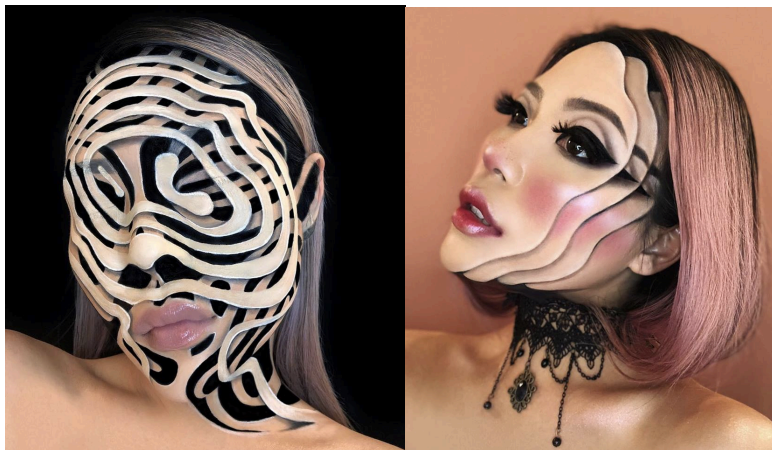
When Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they broke that delicate thread of trust. The eating from that tree represented a turn away from dependence on God and toward independence from God. The eating from that tree cracked

that pure reflection into so many shards of mirror and in their shame, Adam and Eve put on masks to hide their disconnected lives.

God sent them out of the Garden of Eden so that they could no longer eat from the Tree of Life. Why did he do that? Was God being mean? No. If they had still been given access to the Tree of Life, after having eaten from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they would have remained in this state forever... Darrell Johnson writes, "in mercy, God blocked the way to ... the tree of life (Gen 3:24). God, in mercy, did not want us to experience the horror of living independently of God forever."<sup>1</sup> Not being able to eat from the Tree of Life was a mercy of sorts... So, this cursed shard-like brokenness are the backstory to Revelation 22... And the darkness that comes when we hide the broken pieces of our selves behind masks because of our shame... This, too, is a backstory to Revelation 22.

We, sons of Adam, and daughters of Eve that we are, we eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil... the tree of perceived independence from God... the tree of untrust... and we, daughters of Eve and sons of Adam, we have masks that we wear to hide the broken shards of ourselves.

I ran across four things in the last while that got me thinking about faces and the masks we wear... One was this makeup artist, Mimi Choi... who paints her face to look all kinds of crazy. There's the literal mask that makeup is, and the illusion that she creates that our faces are something vastly other than what they are...



These images are haunting and disturbing because there's something about our faces...

---

<sup>1</sup> Darrell Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge*, p. 377.

And then I ran across the story of Katie Stubblefield...



– a woman who when she was 18 and devastated because of a break-up made a snap decision to take her life with a gun. And she did not succeed. She lived, but she lost her face. Katie has had three faces.... The one she was born with, the one that was disfigured by a gunshot wound, and the one that she received from a woman who died and donated her face... There's something about a face transplant that seems different than anything else one can transplant on a body... or in a body... There's something about our faces...

And then my friend of 20 years, Kristin Kobes Du Mez, chair of the history department at Calvin College, revealed in a facebook post that she has prosopagnosia, face-blindness. She doesn't recognize faces. Even of her own family. This is a reality that she's been living with all her life and that she has tried to hide using compensatory strategies... And again, there's something about this that hits us, because there's something about our faces.

And finally I saw this post from several years ago - - - Onagatay gave Samara a doll that he made – without a face... “because” he said, “the creator sees the heart.”



And it's beautiful... but when Zoe got hers, she drew a face on it. Because, there's something about faces!

And the truth behind all of these things is that we have some complex desires, I think, when it comes to our faces and how we are received by other people and by God... Because of our brokenness, we have the desire to hide our true selves behind the face that we want you to see, that we want God to see. We have some shame and we don't want others to see that, so we paint ourselves and hope that you just get to know the us that we want to project...

Deeper than that is the quiet longing that we would be known and understood and loved (by people and by God) in spite of our faces – their beauty, their lack thereof... their recognizability, or lack thereof... (humans look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart)...

But deepest and most mysterious of all, I think, is that we have the desire to be fully seen and fully known and fully understood and recognized for who we really are, *including* the reality of our unadorned faces. We want to see and be seen, face to face.

C.S. Lewis's last novel is a book entitled, "Till We Have Faces." And the point of this complex novel can be summarized, perhaps, in Lewis's defense of the title: "a human 'must be speaking with its own voice (not one of its borrowed voices), expressing its actual desires (not what it imagines that it desires), being for good or ill itself, not any mask.'"<sup>2</sup> In the book itself, Lewis writes, "How can [God] meet us face to face, until we have faces?" In some senses, our growing in our spiritual maturity is a growth in our capacity to show up face-first in this world with openness, with wholeheartedness, with truth... all the while readying ourselves for that time when we will see God face to face, when we will know God even as he fully knows us (1 Corinthians 13:12).

This is what Revelation 22 promises... that we (with our faces) will see God and God's face and God's name will be on our forehead. And we will have full access to the Tree of Life again... Why? Because there will no longer be any concern for us not trusting God, because God will be everywhere. We will be nourished by the Tree of Life and the leaves of the Tree of Life

---

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Till\\_We\\_Have\\_Faces](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Till_We_Have_Faces)

will heal the nations. We will be completely restored ... all the broken pieces of our selves... all the broken pieces of our world... will be together and we will purely reflect God's image.

It is not lost on me that most of this sermon has revolved around our faces and this passage says that we will see *God's* face. Given how important faces are to knowing one another, it makes sense to me that this is a longing that we have. But it's not just a longing that we have, it's a promise that God makes to us. We will see *God's* face. I have no idea what that will be like on the new earth, but we get glimpses of this now... when we see, truly see, the faces of the fellow image-bearers around us. And love them. As the Les Mis' song intones, To love another person is to see the face of God.

We see glimpses of God's face in the faces of people—especially when the masks are off and we interact truly face to face. As 2 Cor 3:18 says, “We all, who with unveiled faces or reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”

And that transformation will one day be complete.