

Series: BETWEEN THE TREES—February 21, 2010

**WHEN A GREAT PLAN COMES TOGETHER!
Revelation 21-22; Genesis 2**

1. I have a question for you: If you could have any wish come true—for this planet, for your life, for everything you can think of—what would it be? We're going to make a list this morning—and we'll use as much paper as we need to!

Some recurring themes throughout the years:

*Plenty for everyone

*Peace in every home, every country, every school—everywhere

*Leaders with **character and integrity**--who are authentic, who can be trusted to be who they claim to be and who will **not** disappoint the people and the causes they lead.

*Total elimination of all causes of suffering, disease, crime and injustice

*All of nature restored to its original glory and beauty and ecological balance; all animal life and vegetation and land and seas and lakes—totally free of pollution

***Everyone** is loved; everyone finds meaningful, joyful, intelligent work

*Greed, hatred, lust, exploitation, murder, bullying, jealousy, lying—and every form of wickedness—gone!

*Justice is complete and fair and final

*We have answers for all the questions; there is a place to satisfy all of our curiosity

*There is no shame, regret, emotional pain, drudgery, depression, mental illness and loss.

*Everyone would understand the power and glory of God—and receive the leadership of His Son—Jesus Christ—and the Eternal Life that brings.

- a. My guess is that, except for the last one, **most** people on this planet would agree with the items on this list. I believe these longings of the heart are built in—evidence that we are born with eternity in our hearts.
-Here's our problem. We humans don't know **how** to make that happen. We've been trying for thousands of years—using everything from free enterprise to dictatorships to religious control—to **make all things right**--and we **can't** pull it off. It's like we're **lost in the forest** and can't find our way home.

- b. Would it help you to know this morning that God is not only **interested** in all these things, but is **actively engaged** right this very moment in making it happen? In fact, **making all things right** is, in fact, **God's** mission. And **that's** the story the Bible tells.

-And it is very important to understand that though the Bible spans 1500 years in it's writing through a wide variety of authors, cultures and genres of literature—it is, in fact, a **single** story. It has a beginning, an overall plot—and a dramatic ending.

- c. Our calling, as God's people, is to know the information in this book and figure out what to do; it's to grasp the basics of what God is up to—what **His Mission is**—and join Him. Because, see, He supplies the power and the plan—but He has chosen to work through flawed people—like me. And you. People who will

watch for where He's already at work—and say, **Use me!** My question over the next weeks of this series is, **Will you be one of them?**

2. How many of you like stories? What's your favorite kind of story? How many of you like mysteries? Romances. Action thrillers? Comedies? Now, some books being published are pretty random—like the one with blank pages where you write your own! But you can usually tell what an author is up to by reading the beginning—and the ending.

-That's how I would like to frame our time together this morning. Many of you know that the Bible ends with the book of Revelation—which is a strange book by **any** standard. Our difficulty is in the metaphors it uses to protect it's readers from being slaughtered (a lot of them refer to Roman oppression). I would suggest that it was also difficult for John, disciple of Jesus, to record because he's trying to describe a heavenly vision in with human words.

-But the **end of the story** is quite clear. Satan is defeated; there is a final judgment for every person who has lived. And then these words:

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children." (Revelation 21:1-7 TNIV)

- a. Has anyone besides me been a little fuzzy on what Heaven is **really** like—or all about?

-As young teen, I remember asking, Mark Pfeffer, a neighbor kid a couple of years older than me, if he wanted to go to Heaven. He said, "Well, it depends. If that means I can have sex with girls all day (not his **exact** words)—then Yes!" I wasn't sure **exactly** what to say to him. To be honest, being about 14, that didn't sound bad to **me** either!

-What I remember most clearly is the **Sunday School, flannel-graph** version of Heaven. Big buildings made of gold, encrusted with jewels; people walking around in white robes; lots of music. Not rock and roll, mind you—probably a little more like Lawrence Welk—minus the bubbles—only clouds. And everyone--**smiling!**

-And we were told as kids, “We’re going to just **sing** for all of eternity! Maybe even longer!” I thought, “Oh no! Heaven will be like a church service that just never ends!” Now, I’ve been in church services that I **thought** would never end—but I wouldn’t describe that experience as...well...**Heaven!**

- b. Something else I found privately disappointing. I’ve **always** loved and been **fascinated** with nature—wood, streams, lakes, mountains. The thought of eternity in a city made of gold instead of cement was **not** all that attractive to me. However, it **was** better than the alternative!
-And I was fuzzy on how we end up in heaven. From the teaching I’d heard, it was like we’d all be scooped off of this planet—as it flamed out--to this faraway place where God was. Have you noticed that the film industry is stuck in this mode? Heaven is like this see-through place where there’s a **really** good smoke machine. People sit on clouds and either play harps or eat bagels with cream cheese on them. For eternity! Doesn’t that seem—**BORING?** There! I said it.
- c. Over the years—with help from professors and personal study, I began to realize that my view of **What’s Next** wasn’t even **close** to being accurate—**or** biblical. For example Revelation describes the **New Jerusalem** as a city with streets of pure, transparent gold and foundations of jewels and gates of pearl. Did you ever notice what the angel says to John immediately before showing him this?

**"Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb."
(Revelation 21:9b TNIV)**

-The Bride, the wife of the Lamb, is a biblical metaphor referring to the followers of Jesus! And it’s so reassuring—because it’s saying that as awful and messed up as we sometimes feel—when God is finished with us, we will be **transcendently beautiful!**

- d. Something else we’ve gotten wrong. Our final dwelling place isn’t someplace way out there beyond the stars. God has made all things new—including a new heaven and a new earth—and He’s coming here to **dwell with his people:**

**And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.
(Revelation 21:3 TNIV)**

- e. The next chapter, Revelation 22, gives us a more tangible picture of what the future holds for us. Let’s take it one piece at a time

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. (Revelation 22:1-2a TNIV)

*Well, first there's a river there—**as clear as crystal...** Water! Clean unpolluted acid-rain-free water! I love being by water! It doesn't say anything about fish or fishing—so I'll have to use my imagination.

On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. (Revelation 22:2b TNIV)

*There are **trees** there. We will **not** live on an ocean of gold pavement! And, specifically, the **tree of life** that bears fruit! When it refers to 12 crops of fruit—it's symbolic for unusual fruitfulness. More on this tree later.

And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (Revelation 22:2c TNIV)

*Would anyone know **why** the nations need healed? Our relationships are a **mess**. So, this is describing a place and a people where there's complete unity and harmony and transparency between humans: **Peace!**

No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever. (Revelation 22:1-5 TNIV)

*Something else. There's work for **us**, His Servants, to do. We will serve Him—and we will **reign** with Him. Forever and ever. And because there's no curse—our work will not be frustrated by all the detours and stupidity and deadlines and politics it usually is.

3. Now, hold that picture in your minds for a moment:

*Rivers flowing

*Trees growing—particularly, the tree of life

*Harmony, honesty—unity between humans

*Meaningful work to do

*All this after God made His dwelling right there with us.

-Now, let's skip back about 1000 pages to Genesis—the beginning of the book.

Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (Genesis 2:7-9 TNIV)

*Now, is any of this sounding familiar? The first human is created, God gives him life—and then He creates trees—all kinds of them—that are not only beautiful—but

produce food; fruit. And notice which one is singled out in **this** narrative—the **tree of life**. Hmmm!

A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters (Genesis 2:10 TNIV)

*There's not only a tree of life—there's a river flowing through the center of it all.

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it...Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals. (Genesis 2:15; 19-20 TNIV)

*Notice what's going on here. God is involving humans from the very beginning in work! He says to this first man, "Go ahead! **You** name the animals!" Now, God is perfectly capable of doing that—yet, for some reason, hands it to man. "Go ahead, I'll just bring them in one-by-one—or two-by-two... No, I'll do that later. So, the first animal comes in and the man says, "Uh, hippopotamus!"

-Then there's this awkward moment with God. He turns to the Spirit and says, "**You** stop him! I don't know what he's doing!" So, the next animal comes in and God says, "Go ahead. Try it again. Adam says, "Uh...duck-billed platypus!" The next animal comes in, and Adam is all tapped on his creative juices, "Uhhhh...I don't know. Okay. **DOG!**" God says, "Hey, that's my name spelled backwards!" Next. "Cat." Cat?...Hey, I didn't make those!

-Now, here's my point. And there is one. **God** starts something here—that is a pattern all through His story. He uses people to do work—that **He** could do a lot more efficiently on his own! This shows, however, that God invites **us...**to join Him in doing His work. Even when it's awkward. He truly gives us **authority** and the **responsibility** to work alongside Him!

*The final piece here is God creating a woman—a suitable companion—for the man he had already made. There is some sense through this story that as God creates, what He makes gets better and more sophisticated each time. Which would mean...? And when they come together as husband and wife—they are once again...one flesh. And this statement:

Now the man and his wife were both naked, but they felt no shame. (Genesis 2:25 NLT)

-This is **far** more than them feeling secure about their nakedness. It's what everyone dreams of; finding someone with who they are **totally** safe—where they can be totally open, no secrets, no junk; where there's oneness. **Harmony!**

4. If this were the opening scene of a movie, some of the dominant pictures you would see would be rivers, humans partnering with God in his work—and harmony between God and people—and people and each other. And in the middle of it all—a tree of life. -Now, does this scene sound familiar? Again, if this were a movie—the **closing** scene would look pretty much the same as the opening scene. And the question—the **plot** would be, **What happened between the trees?**

-Think about it in terms of a well-known scene. Imagine that the movie, **Titanic** opened with Leonardo and Kate riding at the bow of the ship—and then closed with them **riding at the bow of the ship**. How many of you know what happened to the **Titanic**? Knowing the fate of the Titanic would bring up a **huge** question; “What was the story between those scenes?” For the Titanic to emerge like new—when it was sitting in two chunks, rusting and deteriorating under 3 kilometers of ocean for 70 years—raises all sorts of questions. **Something profound must have happened!** -The question, **What happened between the trees?** describes the **Mission of God**. It’s the larger story between Genesis 1 & 2—and Revelation 21-22. It’s summarized in these words:

And the one sitting on the throne said, “Look, I am making everything new!” (Revelation 21:5 NLT)

-The One speaking—is the One who created everything in the first place! And He **will** bring it about! He says, **I am the alpha and the omega**—i.e., the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. He’s saying, “I have the last word. On everything!” And He says, **“I am the beginning and the end.”** Who said how things would start? Well, God did. He spoke it into being. Who says how things will end? God does.

-The second law of thermo-dynamics doesn’t have the final word. Global warming, pollution, nuclear weapons and de-forestation do not have the final word. Governments, armies—theologians, futurists—people, no matter **who** they are or **think** they are--don’t have the final word. God does. And **right now?** He is **on mission**—and He is **making ALL things new**.

-What will it look like? Well, go back to the beginning—to Eden—to catch a glimpse of what it was like when all things were new. But **one** tree will, in fact, be missing. Does anyone know which one it is? **The tree of the knowledge of good and evil**. Been there. Done that! And the snake dangling from those branches will be gone, too. But we’ll save **that** for another time!

5. This whole story going on **Between the Trees** raises a **lot** of questions, doesn’t it? One of them is, “Why would God **wait** so long to make all things new?” I mean, wouldn’t it have been **easier** for God to have cleaned up the mess **before** it started to get really nasty? So. **Why didn’t He?** Answer? I don’t know; He’s **GOD**—I’m not. -However, I do know this; God does **perfect** work—and His ways are **not** my ways—or yours. Our problem is that we think God is stuck in the same web of time we are. To us, the process seems **endless**. But God is timeless. I know this: The final result of Him throwing out His arms—and drawing all things together, making **all** things new--will somehow be totally right! See, we’re latecomers. God has been in the game ever

since the train wreck. And He entered history through Jesus—and won a victory at the cross that ensures the final outcome of what is now happening **between the trees**.

6. And that's where we find ourselves, isn't it? **Between the trees**. When **we**—humankind--decided to do things **our** way—we **voted God off the island**. And we live under the curse of, **I did it MY way!** Between the trees is a place where life **isn't** a garden. Food doesn't just magically appear in the backyard; weeds do. If we want food we have to sweat.

-The water here isn't a clear sparkling river we can drink from. We might get sick! The water on this planet needs **serious** work!

-And the nations—our broken relational world--has yet to be healed. Other nations bash Canada for hosting the Olympics! Every day, the newspapers carry way more stories about break-ups than reconciliations; about wars and conflicts than peace agreements. More families are in chaos than live in harmony. Even the gatherings of God's people—who have the same Spirit in each person—sometimes seem more interested in being right and getting noticed—than loving and showing grace and patience. Total harmony is still a dream—even for newlyweds!

-That's where **we** are. But here's the deal: **Through Jesus** and his victory on the cross over death and evil, **God is at work!** Making **all things new, restoring and recovering and re-doing** what has grown old, gotten messed up, been lost and undone is **still** His mission. And God is **ON** mission. Make no mistake about it.

-It is **so** important to understand that this is all God's mission. If it's ours—we can fail. If it's **God's**—it cannot fail! It **will** not fail. God does not have a mission for his **church**—His **People!** No, God has a church, a **people** for His mission. Remember the whole thing of meaningful work—cooperation between God and people? That part still happens. But, as at the beginning, we have a choice. We choose whether our life will be about God's Kingdom; God's mission of making all things new—or about **our** kingdom; **our** mission. The difference? Our kingdoms and missions will all fail—if they're about our personal success, prosperity, reputation and ego.

-Over the next weeks, we're going to be tracing God's mission through the Bible. In short, it's about God creating and restoring both a **people** and a **place**. When we engage, we are partnering with all those who have gone before us. Those who have been recorded—Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Elijah, Daniel, Peter, John, Barnabas, Paul...and those who are just as important—but nameless. This story is not a hodge-podge of interesting God-anecdotes—but a story that is just as consistent as Genesis 2 is with Revelation 21-22!

-It's as story, like any story, that's messy; sometimes chaotic. There are times when you wonder **what** in the world God is doing and **why** in the world He puts up with people. It's a story that shows people's deep, deep flaws—and how God uses them anyway. And there are places in this story, like **any** good movie plot, when things seem totally ruined, totally out of control, totally irredeemable—**but God...!** In fact, I would argue that **all** good stories come from God—where, at the darkest possible moment—something happens that changes **everything!**

7. I think there are some things to remember as we live, on mission, ***Between the Trees***.

a. First, we **can't** do everything—but I can guarantee you that God has called us ***all*** to something. I want you to think about what we mentioned at the beginning; our dream for this world:

*Plenty of food and water for everyone

*Peace and harmony ***everywhere***.

*Authentic leaders with ***character and integrity***

*The elimination of suffering and disease and pain

*Nature restored to its original beauty and ecology.

****Everyone*** is loved—and finds meaningful work.

*Greed, hatred, lust, exploitation, bullying, jealousy, lying—and every form of wickedness—gone!

*All people are treated with justice, fairness and equality.

*Life makes sense; curiosity is satisfied; questions are answered.

*There is healing and forgiveness for shame, regret, emotional pain, depression, and mental illness.

*Everyone in the world sees the power and goodness of God—and chooses to follow His Son, Jesus Christ—and in ***doing*** so, finds eternal life!

-Here's what I believe. Everyone here, I believe, has a passion for at least one of these areas—and probably more. Our calling in life is to join God in His mission to renew, restore, and redeem everything and everyone. All we need are eyes to see ***where*** God is working—and He is—***right under our noses***—and join Him there. There are some things God has called us ***all*** to; like loving God and others, dealing with the junk in our lives, treating others with fairness—and extending God's reputation as a loving and worthy leader.

-But beside this, God has gifted you to serve there in one of these arenas. How do you know one? Well, you probably already have and some ability for it—whether it's bringing food for the hungry, restoring creation, helping people heal, or working for social justice. Our calling is to work in unity together in accomplishing God's ***amazing*** mission—***Between the Trees!***

-And what you do matters. Right in the middle of this description of that final day when the resurrection power of Jesus will win the final victory over sin and pain and mess, Paul, an early leader, says this to people just like us—a bunch of flawed, gnarly people:

With all this going for us, my dear, dear friends, stand your ground. And don't hold back. Throw yourselves into the work of the Master, confident that nothing you do for him is a waste of time or effort.

(1 Corinthians 15:58 MSG)

-Do you see the awesome news in this? This means that ***everything*** counts—when we engage in this massive, full-court press God is on to make things right. Of course, the alternative is true—too. If we spend our lives grasping, clawing, struggling for more—or for a place on the ladder of success—we can lose it all.

Jesus said, “Better make sure who and what you’re living for!” Choose well—and live with abandon!

- b. Another suggestion for life **Between The Trees**. Like all of God’s people, since the beginning of time, we will need **Hope** to **persevere**. That is a major theme throughout the Book of Revelation. As we all throw ourselves forward wholeheartedly there will be times when we come to a full and sudden stop. Paul—who was **on God’s mission**—got thrown into jail. John—encourager of the churches—got exiled. Authorities thought they’d stopped them for good! -They had **no idea** that 2000 years later, we’d be reading and studying and taking our cues from their letters. Paul says, **Don’t let anything stop you! Everything you do—counts! Way more than you would imagine!** Jesus said that **every** act of love—even giving a cup of cold water—**counts!**
- c. Another message we really need to understand in God’s mission. God is **always** redeeming, restoring, renewing, and redoing things. That’s not our experience in the age of the **disposable**—which, on a side note—is creating massive problems in our world! -God isn’t like that. This planet is not a throwaway. He is making **all** things new. And God has **never** created a disposable person. He made it possible for **everyone** to be redeemed—at incalculable cost to Himself. And we are called to value and treasure **every** person as God would.
- We think we know something about redeeming and restoring things. God takes a cross—a form of torture and humiliation taken to the limit—He uses it, redeems it, and plasters it everywhere—even around the necks of people who don’t get it—as a sign of Hope! That’s what God does in His Mission—and that’s what He expects **us** to do. Nothing—not even church history, as grim as it seems, is a throwaway! God wastes **nothing!**
- d. And the final message we really, **really** need to get as we live **Between the Trees**: Live with **HOPE** and **JOY**. To be totally honest—my sense is that sometimes followers of Jesus who seem most devoted sometimes lose their joy in the middle of things. Sometimes that happens when others let us down. But I think it mostly comes from sensing that as devoted as we are, as hard as we work—and as much as we give of ourselves—the whole planet is on this slide toward oblivion. We’re overwhelmed.
- And we just have to remember—**nothing** we do is pointless. God is powerfully are work in places we would **never** dream. It’s **His Mission**; He’s doing the heavy lifting. And He will complete it! And as we speak, He is making all things new—redeeming **everything**—one person, one place at a time!

Q & A

8. People in this world have been trying, in one way or other, to get back to the Garden of Eden for thousands and thousands of years. To the place of plenty, of ageless health, of painless, hassle-free life, of peace with each other and peace in our restless hearts. -The bad news is—**we can’t get ourselves there!** The **Good News** is that God has made a way **between the trees** to where we need and want to be. It’s **another** tree. A **cross**—of all things! And Jesus Christ is **Lord of all!**