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Sermon Title: The Tree of Life
Scripture: Mark 4:35-41
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

mark 4:35-41

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'

A good book. A good movie. A good story in the Bible. They all have one thing in common. You need to hang in there till the end. You need to know how it turns out.

Our final hymn today can be a bit of a downer:

*The storm is strong; we face the wind.
the water rises; waves crash in.*

Oh, yeah, like we need to be told that! Even the tune is plodding, foreboding, as though discouragement itself was playing the organ. The hymn is based on an interesting Bible story. Jesus and his disciples are out on a boat, a vicious storm comes up quickly, the disciples are scared to death ... and Jesus is sleeping soundly in the back of the boat, oblivious to danger and fear, and not helping at all.

We could stop the story right there. Threatening storm. Scared disciples. Remote, disinterested God. It's a very human story. Probably matches what a lot of people think. Life is tough. God is busy. End of story.

We could do that with the Jews. They start off with great promise: become a thriving tribe, head down into Egypt, treated like royalty, end up as slaves. That also is a very human story. The ups and downs of life: betrayal, disappointment, potential wasted and lost. End of story.

And how about the Parable of the Prodigal Son? Man has two sons. One is diligent, hardworking. The other is a spoiled brat. The spoiled brat runs off and wastes his life, runs through his money, breaks his parents' hearts, and bank account, ends up living in a pigsty. Now that's a human story! Spoiled kids, wasted opportunity, degradation, excess, humiliation, heartache. End of story.

One more. The Parable of the Good Samaritan. A man is headed to work. Proud, energetic, great work ethic. Gets jumped on the highway. A bunch of low-life thugs, parasites, mug him, beat him, leave him to die. People come by. Do nothing. Don't want to get involved, get their hands dirty, in a hurry, so they leave him be. Let him rot. How human is that story? Crime run amok. Public outrage. Private do-nothingism.

We could even look at Jesus's life. Very popular. People flock to him, follow him, believe in him. Then the powers that be turn on him. There are turf battles and back-stabbing. Jesus ends up on a cross, life cut short, promise unfulfilled, dead end. End of story. And that is a very human story.

All these stories are true, and real, and believable ... up to a point. If you don't finish the story.

Most of you know that Alida and I were in Paris in May, little thing called a "honeymoon." I've already given a whole sermon on it, so for the sake of today's sermon let me just say it was fantastic, it was amazing, beautiful, inspiring, happy, everything that dreams are made of.

Now, while we were there, the famous French film festival was going on in Cannes, and an American film won "Best Picture." Starring Brad Pitt, it is called "The Tree of Life." We actually considered going to see it in Paris! But we decided to walk through Paris under the stars instead. When we got home, we went to the movies to see the Cannes Film Festival's Palme d'Or winner. It was awful. Troubling. Disturbing. Seething. It begins with a sudden death and goes down hill from there. When the domestic abuse was starting to bubble over, we got up and left.

A few days later, we got that depressing movie out of our heads by going to see Woody Allen's new film, "Midnight in Paris." Sweet, lovely, funny, charming, beautifully filmed, wonderfully scored, it transported us back to Paris and left us there. Life is so nice when everything is nice. Nothing disturbing to unsettle us.

But life isn't like that. Life is filled with beginnings and endings, and surprises in between, and if we stay rooted long enough, we may find ourselves in a better place than we imagined. But if we give up too soon, we may miss the best part. For who knows what reason I re-read some reviews and articles about "The Tree of Life." Evidently, they had stuck it out. They stayed to the end.

Stephen Holden, writing in *The New York Times* saw it as "a solemn contemplation of God, family, and creation" and referred to the "reverential mood" of the film. Evidently, if I had stayed to the end, I would have discovered the "imagining of a resolution to all human conflict in an afterlife on a beach." I missed that part. (Holden, Stephen. "Authority, From God to Dad." *The New York Times*. 14 July 2011. Print.)

A. O. Scott's film review went even deeper, remarking that "moviegoers eager for rapture can find consolation — to say nothing of awe, amazement and grist for endless argument in ""[The Tree of Life](#),"" which contemplates human existence from the standpoint of eternity." And of God. Blending startling photographic images of creation and birth with a very human 1950s family story, the movie digs into God, death, life, despair, hope and "ponders some of the hardest and most persistent questions, the kind that leave adults speechless when children ask them." He adds, "the sheer beauty of this film is almost overwhelming, but as with other works of religiously minded art, its aesthetic glories are tethered to a humble and exalted purpose, which is to shine the light of the sacred on secular reality." (Scott, A. O. "Heaven, Texas and the Cosmic Whodunit." *The New York Times* 26 May 2011. Print.)

Who knew? Certainly not this idiot who walked out in the middle of it! I left "The Tree of Life" half-grown, which is like leaving Jesus sleeping through a storm, and the Prodigal Son depressed and angry in a pigsty, and the Jews stuck down in Egypt, and Jesus nailed to the cross forever.

Life requires endurance. Life requires follow-through. Whenever we give up too soon on anything, or anyone, we give up the possibility of what might have been. We miss what the end of the story might have been. When we quit on ourselves, on others, on God, we create false endings. At various

stages of life, we might be tempted to give up on school, on career, on marriage, on friends, on life. We may encounter some failure, and we let that be the end of the story. We may have sickness, or tragedy, and we let that be the end of the story. We may confront death, and we assume that is the end of the story. In fact, when you hear that sentence you may be ready to tap me on the shoulder and say, "Aahh, David, that pretty much is the end of the story." But not in Christ's way of thinking. Christ is forever meeting us at what we think are end points and turns them into starting points.

When Jesus met Peter and Andrew, James and John, they were fishermen, probably just like their fathers and grandfathers for generations back. And Jesus said, "Have you ever thought of doing something else? What about going after 'bigger fish'? Come with me. I'll make you fishers of men. Together, we can change the world!"

St. Paul was a miserable, rotten human being, the chief agitator and persecutor and even executioner of Christians. But Jesus didn't let that be St. Paul's end story. He made that the beginning of a whole new life, a transformation, a conversion so big that Paul practically creates the "Christian Church." Even in this story, the Prodigal Son doesn't stay stuck in the pigsty. He leaves, he gets up, he shows both gumption and humility; he goes home, he provides the opportunity for the father to welcome him home, he makes it possible for reconciliation, forgiveness, love.

You know the story of Lazarus, Jesus's friend. Lazarus dies, Jesus shows up four days later. Too late, people tell him. The grieving is full blown, the dead body has begun decomposition. "It stinks," the Bible says. Death, it really IS the end of the story. But Lazarus's sister dares to imagine more to the story. Imagine that! She actually said to Jesus, "but even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will do for you." (John 11:22) It doesn't say what she's asking or what she's expecting. She just believes the story isn't over yet.

That's our Christian faith. Your story doesn't end. Not with your defeat, not with your failure, not with your sickness, not with your divorce, not with losing your job, not with your death. In the Christian faith, any time of trouble is a beginning point, not the end.

I spent time this week with a young man. I'm going to guess he's 25 or so. I've actually met him a few times this spring and summer, but he was so wasted he doesn't remember, so each time it's as though he's seeing me for the first time. Beginning about May I stumbled across him. A wreck, disheveled, sick, putrid. So I took him to my favorite restaurant. Each time I

see him, he's a little less gross, a little more together. Now he's on a good path. He's a handsome devil, smart as a whip, quite engaging, and it turns out he knows his Bible. He was telling me stuff I didn't know, but when I got home and looked it up ... he was right!

My point is the kid is in the middle of his story. I'm sure most folks have closed the book on him, thinking he's a dead end, the end of his story is nigh. He just got out of prison, so I know he's a criminal. He's been homeless, I've seen him drunk, he's broke. And who knows what else? But, by the grace of God (and I mean that literally: *by the grace of God*) his story is still being lived out. It's not done, he's not done, God isn't done.

So, the Jews get out of Egypt and find the Promised Land. The Prodigal Son goes home to a loving family. And Jesus, asleep in the back of the boat, wakes up and calms the storm. That's the faith we treasure in Christ. And so, in just a moment, we'll stand and sing our final hymn. We'll sing the first verse,

*The storm is strong; we face the wind.
the water rises; waves crash in.*

We'll sing that because it's true. The storm is strong. Winds and waves of life assault. But we don't stop. We know there's more to the hymn and more to the story. We'll sing the second verse,

*But you, Christ, you are with us here.
We turn to you in all our fear.*

Because we know, with Christ, what seems like the end is just the beginning. With Christ there's always more. So we'll even sing the third verse,

*What can you be? What power your say,
that even winds and sea obey?
Remove our fear of death and harm.
Give us your faith and still our storm.*

Let's not only sing it together, let's also try to believe it together.