

Ezekiel 17: 22-24; Mark 4: 26-34

“Holy Kin-dom”

Thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain.

On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.

All the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the LORD have spoken; I will accomplish it.

Here is our creator God creating again, planting again, this time a noble tree that would provide shelter and food, the necessities for life, for God’s creation, for ALL kinds of creatures.

Last week, in the book of Genesis, we heard God taking an evening stroll in the garden in Eden, in search of company of the human-creature God had made, out of the dust of the ground and gave life to. God had planted that garden and put the human creature there, safe and sound, lacking nothing. Then, they went missing.

In that garden, God had made to grow, out of the ground, every tree that was beautiful and good to eat, for the enjoyment and nourishment of the human creatures. God had also planted the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which were not for consumption by the human creatures; they had God for that. When they ate from the tree despite what God had told them, they had to leave the garden that had provided everything they needed and start living elsewhere, producing food and fending for themselves instead. Seems to me they are not unlike some of us in our youth, who left the safety and security of parents’ home, setting out to face the world on our own. (There is a tradition that interpret this so-call “Story of the Fall,” not as a downward fall but as a human growing up and gaining and agency and with it the burden of consequences and responsibilities.)

Today’s passage Susanna just read for us is from another time and another place in the world of Hebrew Scriptures. But it is the same, fallible human creatures, the children of God now grown up as the Kingdom of Judah, after the northern Kingdom of Israel succumbed to the kingdom of Assyria. And it is the same, patient, caring, life-sustaining God, now speaking to them, and to us, through Prophet Ezekiel. Perhaps God is not unlike some parents, who would not stop caring but continue to do all they can to provide and care for their children. Here again,

the people of God had “made a wrong choice”; this time in their political entanglement with other kingdoms... how the world “worked,” outside God’s peaceable garden.

Ezekiel as God’s prophet was warning Judah of coming threat and speaking of the destruction of Jerusalem. But something shifts in today’s passage, and God speaks of God’s determination to rescue, redeem, and renew Judah, a small insignificant kingdom in the eyes of other kingdoms of the time vying for power, like Egypt and Babylon. Judah would be taken into captivity and the Jerusalem temple would be destroyed, but that would not be the end of them, and the vision God has for them is much bigger than their own survival as a people.

Right when the Kingdom of Judah seemed to be staring at its own demise, God’s voice comes to them with a promise of a new growth God will plant on God’s holy mountain. But this new growth, coming from a tiny sprig, God will plant in order that it will become a noble tree of great capacity to provide for all who would come seeking shelter and space to survive and thrive.

There are other trees in the field, we are told. God has the power to make high ones low and low ones high, to make the dry tree thrive and turn the green tree dry. But it is under this tree that God would make to grow out of a twig, every kind of bird will live and in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.

Just imagine; can’t you almost see, the birds of all kinds imaginable that are not finding shelter, safety and food in those other trees literally flocking to this new noble cedar that God has made to grow, and find the shade in which to rest and nest. It turns out God of Israel and God of Judah is every bit concerned that peoples from all nations, all kingdoms to thrive, and this Tree God provides, has room for all to come and thrive. In those days, in every earthly kingdom, there were those who were not treated justly, whose basic needs were not met. On God’s holy mountain, God provides a place for all.

John Calvin, one of our ancestors in faith, said that God speaks to us in language we can understand, even though what God speaks of, the Reality of God’s kingdom ruled by God’s saving love, remains a mystery that defies our human reality, the way our world works. Last week I mentioned that the story of the Fall in Genesis is a myth, and by that, I mean a story that conveys a spiritual truth. Such story is a language we can understand. Likewise, in this passage from Ezekiel God is speaking to us using the language of metaphor.

And the ground and the soil as the source of life, and the act of planting, the growth, the trees and the bearing of fruit, were all familiar images and narratives in the world of Hebrew

Scripture that Jesus and his disciples, as well as his Jewish audience and the crowds, knew very well. Keeping that in mind, hear now the Gospel according to Mark, Chapter 4, verses 26-34.

Jesus also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Here, Jesus is speaking using yet another language that people can understand and that is "parable." A "parable" in Greek literally means something that is "thrown alongside." It's a story that is told alongside this thing Jesus wants to tell us about, the kingdom of God. The parable sheds light on it by comparison, again using familiar images: the seed, being planted in the ground, and growing into a big tree, etc., yet, what happens in the story in the parable does not quite match the reality we know. Did something strike you as strange in the first story about the seeds?

I was talking to a Presbyterian pastor in Iowa about preaching on this passage. He said a large majority of his congregants are actually farmers who know a thing or two about planting seeds. I said, "Wow, I wonder if they'd be offended by this parable. I mean, Jesus says the kingdom of God is like someone who scatters the seeds and then goes back to sleep while the seeds grow on their own; he doesn't have to go back until it's time to harvest. The earth produces of itself, it says. What's that about? Miracle Grow? They know it doesn't work like that!"

"Exactly," said my friend. He said the farmers in his church are usually pretty worried about everything; it could be too dry, too wet, too cold or too hot; so many things can go wrong, and they have to work so hard to ensure a decent harvest. And here is Jesus, telling them the kingdom of God is like planting the seeds in the ground that produces of itself, and he's not joking.

Who could appreciate this story? Who would get what the kingdom of God is like?... The ones who know the struggle of planting seeds and making them grow to full harvest.

Imagine farming without all the worry and anxiety; a huge burden lifted up. The Kingdom of God is not like the earthly practice of farming; Jesus' point exactly.

Ezekiel said: Thus says he Lord God; I myself will take a sprig, I will set it out; I myself will plant it in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. I the Lord have spoken; I will accomplish it. The Kingdom of God grows, because God makes it grow. We who have been given the seeds of the good news, the gospel, our job is to scatter them with abandon.

Then in the second parable about mustard seed, Jesus tells us how tiny the seed is, but how it grows to be a great shrub that the birds of the air can nest in its shade. Jesus invokes God's promise in Ezekiel: God does the growing. I will accomplish it, God says. We need not worry that our church is small; just keep witnessing to the wonderful love of God. And those birds Jesus speaks of are the winged-creatures of all kinds who come to rest and nest in the great Tree God planted in Ezekiel; people of all kinds who seek a place of safety and nurture, whose basic needs our society neglect, whose existence are ignored and threatened; they would find them there.

Then there is one more metaphor, a "language" God speaks so we can understand, and that is the metaphor of a "Kingdom." For much of the history of God's people, "Kingdom" has been a mixed blessing at its best. Jesus uses this "Kingdom" language as a metaphor and tell parables about the "Kingdom of God" to shed the light on the Reality of God's reign of love. It is NOT like any earthly kingdom, but something much better.

The earthly kingdom is defined by human monarchy and human leader, and is divided geographically by borders. I don't know when the first time I saw the word "Kin-dom" used where you'd expect it to say the "Kingdom" of God. In God's reign of Love, people who live in it are not subject to a human king, but they are "kin" to one another, bound by bound by the desire to live by the rule of love. May we live to do God's will in this world, till the whole world has joined in the Kin-dom. Amen