

Ezekiel 17:22-24

²²This is what the LORD God says. I myself will take part of the tip of the cedar and plant it. From the topmost of its shoots I will pluck off a tender sprig, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. ²³On the high mountain of Israel I will plant it. It will produce branches, bear fruit, and become a magnificent cedar. Flying birds of every kind will live under it. In the shelter of its branches they will nest. ²⁴Then all the trees in the countryside will know that I, the LORD, bring down the high tree and raise up the low tree, that I make the green tree dry up, and I make the dried-up tree blossom. I, the LORD, have spoken, and I will carry it out.

A Tender Sprig

I.

It's better than dried potpourri lying in a bowl. It's more aromatic than one of those wax tarts melting in the burner and sending a sent wafting into the air. It's fresher than that. You can almost smell it, can't you? Tender sprigs of cedar dominate the sermon slide.

Companies spend a fortune to find something like that—just the right phrase or just the right picture that to grab your attention when you hear or see it. They want your mind's eye to focus immediately on that company and everything they do and everything they stand for. They want that little icon to become...well...iconic.

“This is what the LORD God says. I myself will take part of the tip of the cedar and plant it. From the topmost of its shoots I will pluck off a tender sprig, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain” (Ezekiel 17:22, EHV). A quiet walk in the forest. Peace. Serenity. Calm. You can almost smell the tender sprig of cedar.

Though this is the first verse of our reading today, we are joining a story in progress. At the beginning of this chapter he told Ezekiel: “Son of man, present a challenging parable to the house of Israel” (Ezekiel 17:2, EHV).

Ezekiel had to do it, because God had told him to. He had to do it, even if there was a chance he might be canceled for relaying the parable from God.

In the parable, an eagle—King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon—carries off the tip of a cedar—the king of Judah—to a foreign country—Babylon. It was from Babylon, in exile, that Ezekiel was writing.

The cedar itself represented the kingly line of David. Though it had once been tall and proud, it was no longer anything like its former glory. The eagle of Babylon takes a seed from the cedar to plant in the land of Judah. In other words, King Nebuchadnezzar installs a shirt-tail relative named Zedekiah, who was also from the line of David, as king. Zedekiah is described as a little vine. He was just to be a puppet king. In fact, he swore an oath of allegiance to Babylon using the name of the Lord.

As the parable continues, another eagle is introduced. It is the king of Egypt, who convinces the little vine to rebel against Babylon. This was a violation of the oath Zedekiah swore in the name of the Lord. God promises the destruction of faithless king Zedekiah and Judah itself.

II.

God had warned his people repeatedly that there would be consequences for their

idolatry. Again and again most of the kings and the vast majority of the people refused to listen. The parable served to remind the people of their past faithlessness and consequences that were soon to follow.

There are consequences for violating oaths to the Lord. People take oaths in the courtroom to tell the truth, concluding with the phrase: “So help me God.” Various officials as well as military personnel, take an oath of office. Again, the oath concludes, “so help me God.” Officers of Holy Trinity answer the final question when they are installed: “Yes, with the help of God.” Every confirmed member of this congregation and other congregations answers the questions at confirmation swearing to remain faithful to God even to the point of death.

What is your track record for keeping those oaths? Have you told the truth, as you swore to do? Have you never violated your oath of office in whatever capacity you have served? As for your Christian oath, can you state, unequivocally, that you have never violated it? Do you always conduct yourself like a strong cedar of a Christian—a faithful Christian—or are you more like a shriveled up little vine?

There are problems beyond violating an oath. Zedekiah thought he could choose his own course of action. He was self-reliant. He was proud. He was capable. He was wrong. He was delusional. His choices brought disaster to himself and many others.

Do the strong, capable, self-reliant choices you make apart from God and his direction bring you to the brink of disaster? Do you tip right into disaster?

The people of Israel were condemned by God for their idolatry. There were consequences for it. Is there not rampant idolatry today? Are *you* guilty of it? There is the idolatry of prizing your comfort above all else. There is the idolatry of cheapening human life because it is more convenient to kill a child in the womb than to have a baby. There is the idolatry of entertainment taking priority over Bible study and prayer and worship of the Lord.

Actually, idolatry and evil seem very, very strong. The position of the faithful seems so weak. Christians who uphold the claims of the Bible and confess that Jesus is the only Way to God’s mercy and the only Truth and the Light are mocked. They are given no respect or standing. Christian morality is labeled as bigotry. In many parts of the world, Christians are routinely martyred, but the media find the reporting of such news unimportant next to promoting so-called diversity in our culture.

III.

God’s parable given to Ezekiel did not end with doom and destruction. It continued with our reading today—filled chock-full of the message of the gospel.

“This is what the LORD God says. I myself will take part of the tip of the cedar and plant it. From the topmost of its shoots I will pluck off a tender sprig” (Ezekiel 17:22, EHV).

God loved his people so much that even in spite of their unfaithfulness—of *our* unfaithfulness—he did not leave us without help and without hope. He, himself, made the plan. He, himself, took the tender sprig of cedar from the very tip of the cedar of David’s line and planted it. Even in Ezekiel’s time, the people recognized that the tender sprig spoke of the coming Messiah. That tender sprig is Jesus.

“I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. ²³On the high mountain of Israel I will plant it. It will produce branches, bear fruit, and become a magnificent cedar. Flying birds of every kind will live under it. In the shelter of its branches they will nest” (Ezekiel 17:22-23, EHV).

God would install their Messiah on a high and lofty mountain. Back in the glory days of

Israel, two things stood out prominently in the skyline of Jerusalem—the palace and the temple. The cedar of the parable made them think of the cedar panels in the palace and the temple and their aromatic scent.

Did they understand the branches and the birds of every kind to be the New Testament church? We don't know. Ezekiel reveals that the church established by Jesus with himself as the foundation would have a widespread reach, just as Jesus mentioned in the parable of the mustard seed in the gospel today.

The tender sprig, Jesus, will grow into such a large cedar that it will “produce branches” and “bear fruit.” Every spiritual need is provided for his church by Jesus in his Word and Sacraments.

IV.

In the Second Reading today the Apostle Paul said: “Now we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal home in heaven, which is not made by human hands. ²In fact, the reason we groan is that we long to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven” (2 Corinthians 5:1-2, EHV).

God has placed you in the wonderful place established by Jesus—his church. It is a place that provides a kind of peace the world can never know or provide. The special place of Christ's church gives your heart and soul rest—no matter what swirls around outside in the world. In fact, even though you might have things you still want to accomplish in this life, at the same time you realize that *this* world is ultimately not your home. What comfort it brings to know that no matter what life throws your way, eternity is coming. What comfort it gives to know the promises of Jesus that he will not leave you or forsake you, even through all the difficulties of this life.

The parable concludes: “Then all the trees in the countryside will know that I, the LORD, bring down the high tree and raise up the low tree, that I make the green tree dry up, and I make the dried-up tree blossom. I, the LORD, have spoken, and I will carry it out” (Ezekiel 17:24, EHV).

At the time Ezekiel wrote his prophecy, King Nebuchadnezzar seemed invincible. Who would think that, in the face of such power, God could still keep all his promises? But God would bring the tall tree down and raise up the lowly tree. Jesus would come as the servant of all, but he would be the greatest of all.

Use your voice to let the other trees in the countryside know the greatness of the Lord. Use your voice to tell the sweet message of God's promises kept in Jesus.

The tender sprig has come. He has lifted up the lowly and has built an eternal house in heaven for each of us. Breathe deeply of the salvation brought by the tender sprig. Amen.