

Scripture Ezekiel 17:22-24

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.

Sermon: “Unexpected Kingdom” The Rev. Brent Damrow

Of all things, it happened in 1972 in a suburban mall in Tacoma, Washington. That is where the Master Gardener Program started, all with a trial, with an experiment, with an idea. The idea was simple: training people to learn both the science and the art of becoming a master gardener, one who tends plant and soil, one who brings forth beauty and bounty. And at the heart of that program was always the notion that to become a master gardener was never for their own sake or their own personal enjoyment, but instead that they might help others learn to become better gardeners too, that they might help others create beauty, comfort and peace. It is a movement that now exists in all 50 states, and has a chapter right here in western Massachusetts.

Its founder, Dr. David Gibby, said that it is really all about realizing the miracle and the bounty of life. He said “Look at seeds. Brown and without apparent life at all. And yet you put these brown seeds into brown earth, and with a little water and care you can grow flowers of every color. A miracle, isn’t it?” Take something whose life seems gone, put it in the right place, watch it spring to life, offering beauty not just for itself but for the whole world. That is what God – not just a master gardener but the consummate gardener – is up to here in this passage in Ezekiel.

My friend and colleague Bert Marshall has looked at this text in some depth, and he reminds us that in the time of Ezekiel, the people of Israel were just like those seeds in Dr. Gibby’s hands, their life force seemingly gone. You see, at the time of Ezekiel, their holy place in Jerusalem was destroyed, their wonders plundered, their people sent into exile, their suffering great and their questions many, their future seemingly crushed by the brutal power of the Babylonian Empire. But with defeat and exile as the background, with Babylon puffing its feathers in a display of earthly power, God the consummate gardener shows another way. In this passage God shows true power -- consolation, compassion – the power of tenderness.

I myself, God says, will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar. The cedar, a high and a mighty tree. You need to know that at the time that Ezekiel was writing, the cedar was the very embodiment of great earthly power. It was the image that Israel so desperately sought for itself. Israel so desperately wanted the rest of the world to see their idea of kingdom. To be able to look out and to see them as the height of power and beauty. So tall would they be that everyone from anywhere could see them and marvel.

Truth be told, though, the people of Israel -- just like that Beloved Community we spent time with after Jesus’ death, and maybe in all honesty like our beloved community now – the people

of Israel were always relatively minor players, at least from an earthly power perspective. They were largely ignored or relegated, that is when they weren't being run over or mocked. So how beautiful and how extraordinary, how unexpected is this moment when God says: I'm going to take a sprig of that image that you cast for yourself, that image of power that you imagine would make you so glorious and the envy of all, so tall and majestic. And I'm going to take that image, that deception of what you thought you ought to be, and instead I will show you the kind of kingdom I want you to be.

Friends, this passage reminds us that we know that it is never as important how others see us as it is how God wants us to see others. God says I'm going to take a sprig from the top of the tree and plant it. And you know what? In some research I did, God the ultimate master gardener knows just what she's talking about. This is not metaphor here, friends. Did you know that if you talk to a master gardener, they would tell you what you should do if you want to propagate a cedar tree. Don't plant a seed, they would tell you, it takes too long and it's not nearly as strong. Instead, root a stem cutting. And if you can possibly do it, if you want the best results, take that cutting from the youngest growth the highest you can get on the tree. Take the tender one, as Ezekiel says, the newest growth, and break it off and then plant it and protect it. If you listened to today's Scripture read by Charlotte, God says I will plant it on the mountain of Israel. God the gardener says I'm going to plant it in a place I call home, a place I can watch over and protect it, and watch it grow to my purpose, not to impress but to be truly noble, beautiful, life-giving and serving. Not designed to catch the eye of the powerful, but to provide a place of safety and vision for those least powerful, to bring together every single kind of bird. If you ever read the Bible, and in the same sentence it uses the same phrase differently twice, pay attention. Charlotte said every bird, and then in the next phrase it said every winged creature, just in case you didn't get it the first time. God's vision is not something majestic to admire, but rather the kind of tree that provides shelter for every single kind of living creature.

Not that we might catch a glimpse of what we've done, not that we might be strong, but instead to go back to Psalm 19 to bear witness to how the heavens proclaim all the time the glory of God, and how day after day if we just have eyes to see, we will see it. Ezekiel thunders in this passage that not empire or earthly power will have the last word, only God will. And in this passage God makes clear that God chooses not to be made known through confronting Babylon, strength on strength, but instead to comfort all who have been crushed under the boot of power. To offer all who have been seemingly been deprived of life the chance to blossom into flowers of every color, every hue, every size, and every shape.

This month is Pride Month across this country. One of the core messages of that from a Christian perspective is that each person, each one of us in all of our beautiful diversity, testify to the image and spirit of God, and God's purpose of beauty, life, relationship, and goodness.

Ralph Fiennes says that we should have expected God to show up in just this way, for it is the nature of gardeners to do what God did. He says gardeners are good at nurturing, and they have a great quality of patience. They're tender. They have to be persistent.

Friends, over the last number of years, over the last decade, we have seen all kinds of earthly power stake their claim and try to grab our attention. We have been buffeted by powers of

racism, by powers of sexism, by powers of homophobia. But Ezekiel reminds us that they will not have the last word. We have seen individuals flex the power of gun violence, and we have nations too take up weapons of destruction and economic might to self-serving if not nefarious ends. But we know this because of Ezekiel, they will not have the last word either. This past year, we have been beset by a pandemic, one that has revealed horrendous inequalities in our health care system, tragic imbalances in fundamental access to things like education, food, safety and care. But that will not have the last word either.

So the question is what does this passage have to say to us in these times? First, I think it says that we need to keep our eyes and our faith where true power really lies. Times are getting better. I've heard from so many people that with this new administration in Washington they sleep better, they breathe better. CNN's headline for this morning was that world leaders breathe a sigh of relief with the return to conventional power and wisdom in the United States. Anything, I think, that brings relief is good. But I think the deeper and more real goodness that we need to realize right now is that we become less obsessed, less focused, less preoccupied with any national power. Because no matter who lives at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, our true faith, our true hope, our true allegiance never belongs there. Instead, this passage makes clear that it only and always belongs when we keep our eyes on the tender power of God, the One who will have the last say, the One who at the right moment plants a tender sprig in a new place, that all birds, not just some of them, might find new hope, new vision, new direction – and that includes us, too.

By the way, did you know when is the best time to pluck a cedar twig and plant it? The best time to ensure the most healthy future is in late fall, winter, or early spring, and in the earliest hours of morning. For that is when the plant is the most dormant. That is when it is most deeply at rest. That is when it comes the closest to being dead. Kind of like right now in our collective enterprise, God is right now taking the cedar twig that has come out of these decades and this last year, and planting something new, beautifully *for* us. But I think the prophet would also say, maybe *out* of us. Maybe God is lopping off our own image of what we think church or world should be. Maybe plucking up our own preoccupation with how we want others to see us, and instead give us a vision of how we should see them.

This time of pandemic has helped us find deeper truth. Centered far less on what might impress and far more on how we connect. Obsessed far less with our own height and far more on the collective shade and rest and nest we can offer each other. I'm so profoundly grateful to be able to live in this community, in this place during these hard times. To see over the course of this last year how we've come together, how we've given and how we've mutually cared for everyone. But as we move forward and as things open up and as opportunities present themselves, and the lure of returning to some normal. I do say this, live well. For Christ came to bring life in abundance. And yet as we do, let us remember this image Ezekiel gives of the new unexpected kingdom, incorporating all those things that we have learned about what living well together really means. Not aspiring to heights to impress, but rather the chance to show love and tenderness.

Friends, years later, people might look back at this as a pivotal moment for us as a nation and for us as a church. Right now when our power as an institution might not be what we imagine it to

be. And that is good, because today our passage, the one about the consummate master gardener, reminds us that if we in this moment seek first the kingdom that God imagines, the Kingdom of God. If we first strive after righteousness, which is a fancy way of saying living for the sake of God and neighbor, if we seek to offer goodness for all the kinds of people in this world, really all of them, then all the things of true worth – life, goodness, relationship, depth and beauty -- will break forth from the brown seeds of this very moment into astounding displays of beauty, not just for our benefit, but for all.

After all, God the tender master gardener, the One who started all of Creation as a garden, didn't start it in a suburban mall, but in a place called Paradise. And God undertook it all, not just for her own sake, but instead that she might help us learn about what tender power looks like and become better gardeners, too. That we might join in God's unending, patient, persevering task to create beauty, comfort and peace, bringing the high low, and making that tree that once looked so dead flourish.

Friends, Ezekiel will not let us forget that God has spoken these things, that she will accomplish it, and that it is God who has the last word. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. Amen.