

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Tiffani Harris

God's Arboretum

Ezekiel 17: 22-24; Mark 4:26-34; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17

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Five years ago, I planted a little oak sapling. It was about 10" long with a couple of roots. I don't have about a good track record with planting saplings. So I took extra care with this one. With hopes of having a grand oak tree someday, I watered and protected that little sapling. After about 6 months, it sprouted some leaves – success! But the tree did not grow in height. Each year, I tend to this sapling, watering it and fertilizing it; Brent mows around it. Now, 5 years later, it has added more leaves, but it has not grown one more inch in height. Each year, I think this is the year that tree is going to take off and grow. I have learned one--that I am not a master gardener and two--it is not simple to take a young sapling and turn it into a tree.

In today's unique passages, we catch a glimpse into God's arboretum. Creator God, the arborist, a master gardener produces what only God can produce. The prophet Ezekiel proclaims that God will cut a tender shoot from the top a cedar tree. He will take that shoot, plant it in the ground, and cause it to grow and flourish so that all the birds of the air can find shelter in its branches. Whereas a seed can eventually grow into another tree, a cutting from a tree is a whole different story. A cutting will not grow into another tree on its own. A gardener takes special care to take a cutting and produce a tall tree.

To better understand this message from God, through the prophet Ezekiel, we need to step back for just a moment and catch the big picture. The people of God here are struggling and full of despair. They have wandered far from God's hopes and desires. The Northern Kingdom of Israel has fallen, and the twelve tribes are lost. The Southern Kingdom of Judah watched this happen. Maybe to protect themselves, maybe motivated by fear, they created unholy alliances, putting money, their desires, and their quest for power before God.

They strayed from God and looked in the wrong places for the wrong things. The prophets repeatedly call them back to God, challenging them to repent and put God first. Ezekiel lets them know how displeased God is with their waywardness, their violence, and their disregard for the poor. God responds to this situation in the first part of Ezekiel 17 by asking the Israelites a question. Three times God asks "Will it flourish?" Will it flourish? Will it flourish? Will your compromises and alliances with power bring flourishing?

It didn't. Now the Israelites are in exile. They have been conquered and have lost everything. They lost their king; they lost the temple which was the reminder of God's presence with them, and they have lost their country. They are cut off and in a desert of their own making; they are confused and bewildered. It is into this very confused and desperate situation that the prophet Ezekiel now speaks.

Here we see the character of God is on display. Instead of "I told you so," God speaks words of tender compassion and hope. Ezekiel proclaims that God will take a tender shoot from the top of the lofty cedar and transplant it on a high and lofty mountain. There it will flourish, bear fruit, and become a grand and noble cedar. Under it, every kind of bird will live and thrive and flourish. It will be a place of nourishment for all.

This lofty cedar tree was a Cedar of Lebanon. The Cedars of Lebanon are historic and imposing trees and to this day, are still revered and on the national flag of Lebanon. There are 100 references to Cedars of Lebanon throughout the Old Testament. "The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like the cedar in Lebanon" (Psalm 92:12) "Behold, I will liken you to a cedar in Lebanon, with fair branches and forest shade" (Ezekiel 31:3) In Isaiah, "The bricks have fallen, but we will build with dressed stones; the sycamores have been cut down, but we will put cedars in their place." Known for their strength, these cedars were used in the construction of the temple.

Through the prophet Ezekiel, God speaks a word of hope to a people who have lost everything. And a different way is beginning to emerge. Their exile and spiritual desert is not the end of the story. With almost nothing, God creates something new. While it is tempting to look back and wish about what might have been, the focus here is on the new work that God is doing. God's plan to replant people begins with a small, tender, and pliable shoot.

Taking this cutting of a tender and flexible piece of tree, God plants it and tends it. God's power is made perfect in weakness.

Now, in an era so far removed from the time of Christ, we may wonder how God acts in the world today. We see here that it is in our places of vulnerability and brokenness that God shows up, doing the slow and patient work of re-creating and tending that only God can do. The picture that Ezekiel paints for the beleaguered people of God is one of new life and renewed purpose. God will have the last word in verse 24, saying, "I the Lord have spoken, I will accomplish it."

The strong Cedar of Lebanon, branches full of birds, providing shade and nourishment for all echoes the Abrahamic covenant of Genesis 12: Abraham, and thus God's people, will be blessed and be a blessing to all. God gives a mission and a vocation to be a light for the nations. Ezekiel reminds them of that very mission with this image.

God's grace is generative; it nurtures health and flourishing. This transformation is not a result of their works or actions; for it is God who tenderly looks after the tree. God's plan for replanting people begins with the unexpected – something small and tender. Lost hope, disappointment, discouragement – this is all fertile ground for God to re-create; to patiently and slowly tend a new beginning. Such good news for us today.

I'm captured by this image of a pliable sprig from a tree. It indicates receptivity, teachability, and potential for growth. There is a willingness and consent to be tended, that helps this new creation to flourish.

How might you and I be moldable and pliable in the Master Gardener's hands? Spiritual formation author David Benner describes this very place of being moldable and pliable as surrendering to Divine love.

When we are at the end of our abilities to contain the fear, or the anger or the anxiety or to address our woundedness or to take even one step further, we offer to God our vulnerable and moldable selves. These moments are the place of deep surrender. In these reversals, God shows up.

What about the hardened heart, you might ask? The cynic? The bitter and angry? The old limb that seems to have no bend to it or life left? Beloved of God, have no fear, for God can take a cynical and hardened heart and slowly massage it back to a pliable and teachable position. Later in Ezekiel, the prophet will prophesy to dry and brittle bones that God will breathe new life into them. We just heard this text at Pentecost. Take heart, there is nothing too far gone. Nothing too hard that God cannot soften and replant.

The towering, flourishing, strong Cedar of Lebanon was a symbol of hope. This image was surely on the mind of Christ and his audience as he shared the parables of the sower and seed in the Gospel of Mark that we just heard. Knowing the Old Testament brings so much life and understanding to the New Testament. Written to a Markan community, similarly suffering under persecution, they may have been beleaguered and weary and confused. But Jesus, in this passage, presents God as the one who does the tending and growing. And it's not anything they can do on their own.

Jesus describes how the smallest of seeds, sown on the ground, under the care of the Master Gardener will become a great and mighty, wait for it . . . mustard bush. You mean a Cedar of Lebanon, right Jesus? Nope. A Mustard Bush. The kingdom of God is like an invasive bush. No one would ever plant mustard seeds in their garden. I can imagine someone standing in the back row, listening to Jesus, bursting out in laughter.

A Cedar of Lebanon would be predictable and an imposing metaphor for God's kingdom. If I were writing, I would have the small seed turn into a giant sequoia so all would know there is no other tree that could rival it. But Paul reminds us that we walk by faith and not by sight. God's kingdom is not what we think it is. Keeping us all humble, the seed in this parable becomes the greatest of all . . . shrubs. This mustard bush, however, feeds many – the birds of the air find refuge and nourishment in its branches, just like Ezekiel's towering cedar.

Again, it is another reminder of the God-given mission that was first given to Abraham in Genesis. The vocation for the people of God was and is to be a light to the world. God's people, the church are to be agents of new creation. To be a place where the weary and broken are renewed so that anyone who comes may find rest, safety, and nourishment for their souls just as the birds do in the branches.

God tends the garden of our own souls and that of the kingdom to bring about fruit in God's own time. The Church—you and me--are agents of God's kingdom. The Church is the alternative response to our culture of enemy-making, division, and fear so prevalent today. Through divine surrender and opening our hands to God, God replaces reconciliation in place of division, and in place of shame, God offers forgiveness. In the place of living for self, God offers salvation and restoration. It can feel lonely and disorienting trying to navigate this world with a Christ-centered lens, but in these unexpected places, God acts and moves, slowly and patiently tending like a master Gardner bringing about a new creation. I see evidence of this in lives slowly transformed over time; hurts, and hangups replaced with healing and steady peace. I see lives lived with purpose and freedom in this congregation. I see a church providing nourishment and shelter, and I see other churches seeking the same. Maybe you see these pockets of flourishing all around us.

In the hands of the Divine – a small sprig provides space that nurtures and protects. A tiny seed is prolific and provides for many. Size doesn't matter; experience doesn't matter. Ezekiel even says at the end of chapter 17 that the low tree is brought high and the high tree is brought low. God, the master gardener,

brings about new creation. From the lowly tree of the cross to the outstretched arms of Christ, all can find their everlasting home and new creation in Christ. So, we cling to this promise written by Paul, that “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. Everything old has passed away; behold all things are new.”

As we prepare for the table of our Lord, let us take a moment in prayer and offer ourselves to God. You may want to express this by holding your hands open in prayer and consider how we might be pliable in God’s hands as a prayer of surrender to Divine Love.

O Lord our God, we open our hearts and our hands to you today. Help us to surrender to you and to trust your divine love. We bring to mind all that needs your re-creation and offer it to you now. We trust, Lord, that you will hold us fast. We long to be like the tender and pliable shoot in the master gardener’s hands. As the body of Christ in this place, tend us and grow us into new creation for the sake of the world – so that all may know the saving and reconciling power of Christ and his resurrection.
Amen.

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