

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.

23 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.

24 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.

## WHERE IS GOD?

What do we do when the world we know is falling apart?

Sickness and sorrow can change our lives overnight. How do we think about God when our life is devastated by mortal ills?

When nations go to war, our world can fall apart. Young people serve their country in far off and dangerous places. Some come home broken. And some never come home at all. Families are changed forever. How do we think about God when the world seems to be in chaos?

A faltering economy can also present a challenge to our faith. How do we think about God when we have no job and no prospects for a job?

Some face the betrayal of a loved one or a close friend.

How do we learn to live again when the one we trusted the most can no longer be trusted? Where does God fit into a world where relationships are often broken by sin and mistrust?

## EXILE

God's prophet, Ezekiel faced similar questions long ago. God's people had rebelled against God for a long time. They embraced false worship. They became wealthy at the expense of the poor.

The kings would not listen to the word of God's prophets. Instead they hired preachers who told them what they wanted to hear. God's people unwisely took on the Babylonian empire militarily. And the result was a national disaster.

The Babylonians had taken the leaders of his country into Exile. The only ones left in the land were the poorest of the poor who eked out a living in the midst of unsympathetic and hostile neighbors.

And so Ezekiel wondered,

“Where is God in all this? Why have we been taken from the Promised Land? How could God let this happen to His chosen people?”

## THE LONG ROAD TO SALVATION

Much of the Old Testament was written in response to this question. The prophets used the stories of God's salvation and judgment in the past as a way of understanding what was going on in the present. Just as God delivered God's people from slavery in Egypt so God would deliver God's people from the Exile.

But, first the hardhearted children of Israel would have to truly turn away from their sin and turn toward God. Salvation would be a long and difficult process.

Their unbelieving ancestors had to wander in the wilderness for 40 years before they were allowed into the Promised Land. In the same way, God's people would have to endure a time of judgment before restoration would be possible.

We might like for God's salvation to come quickly and easily. But, it never happens that way. It can't happen that way.

When our world is corrupted by sin and despair, it takes time for God to change our hearts and minds. The cross reminds us that salvation does not come cheap.

Sin exacts a terrible price from all of us.

But, God still comes to save us. We are often unfaithful, but God's love is steadfast and sure.

### STEADFAST LOVE OF THE LORD

One of the saddest books in the Bible is the book of Lamentations. It is essentially a funeral dirge that details the events of the Exile. If you're looking for good news, it's in short supply in the book of Lamentations.

It describes in graphic detail the shame, the hunger, the bitter tears, the atrocities and the utter lack of hope that accompanies military defeat. The writer acknowledges that sadly his people deserve what they got. They had sinned terribly against God, and now they were being judged for their unfaithfulness.

The exiles in Babylon were fresh out of hope in so many ways.

Their children had been killed in battle. They had been humiliated personally and destroyed financially. Many had lost their freedom. Their leaders were corrupt and incompetent.

In other words sin and deceit had crept into every pore of society. And yet even in the middle of such despair they were given a word of hope that came from God.

Even in the midst of such a mournful and pessimistic situation God reminds the writer that this is not the end of the story. Right in the middle of this pitiful lament of shame and despair we read,

“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”

You may recognize in those words the inspiration for one of our more popular hymns, “Great is Thy Faithfulness”. As the hymn puts it, “Thou changest not, thy compassions they fail not, as thou has been, thou forever will be.”

And then the refrain goes, “Morning by morning new mercies I see.”

You may be fresh out of hope. You may believe that you are beyond salvation. You may believe that you are trapped, and there is no way out.

But, God reminds us that there is always hope, not because of who we are but because of who God is. God is a God of compassion. God’s love is steadfast. God comes to a people in exile and says, “Take my hand. I will lead you home.”

This is God’s eternal nature. In a world bent of destruction, God is bent on salvation.

## GOD HAS THE LAST WORD

The passage that precedes our lesson for today is a long allegory of judgment. In that passage an eagle breaks off the topmost shoot of an enormous cedar tree, one of the fabled cedars of Lebanon and takes it to a “city of merchants”.

Thankfully Ezekiel interprets the allegory. The mighty eagle of Babylon has plucked the topmost shoot. In other words the mighty eagle of Babylon defeated God’s people and has taken the best and brightest into captivity.

But, judgment does not have the last word. After describing the second deportation of God’s people using this same eagle image, Ezekiel concludes the chapter with a third poetic allegory. But, this time it is not an allegory of judgment. It is an allegory of salvation.

In this final telling of the story it is not an eagle that plucks the branch from the top of the mighty cedar. It is God. The passage reads, “Thus says the Lord God: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar ... I myself will plant it on a high and mighty mountain.”

Unlike the things that I plant that always seem to die at an early age, this sprig takes root on the mountaintop. It becomes a huge tree, a “mighty” or “noble” cedar. And this tree will be a place of refuge for every kind of winged creature.

Now what does this all mean?

It means that the eagles of this world do not have the last word. God does. The eagles and the great trees of the world are under the rule of God. It is God who (as our passage puts it) makes the “high tree low and the low tree high.”

When all is said and done it is not the Egyptian pharaoh or Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon who will rule. God rules.

Exile does not have the last word, not then and not now because God is still speaking.

### NEW TESTAMENT ECHOES

This passage is echoed in the New Testament. For example, when Mary learns from the angel that she will bear the Messiah she breaks into song.

She sings about the God who fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty. She sings about how God knocks the high and mighty off their high horse and lifts up the lowly. In other words God is still in the business of redemption. God is still in the business of bringing in a kingdom of righteousness and justice.

And yet this mighty kingdom of compassion often begins in a small way. It is like a young tender sprig planted on the mountaintop. It is like a frightened young girl learning that God has chosen to her to be the mother of God.

It is a salvation that can only be told in the language of poetry because it points to something that is above and beyond us.

In the New Testament lesson for today (See Mark 4:30-32) Jesus says that the kingdom of God starts out small. It’s like a mustard seed. That small seed produces a large bush, a bush so ample that it provides refuge for the birds of the air. (Does that sound familiar?)

God’s kingdom can and does begin in some rather inauspicious ways. But, from those small beginnings a mighty kingdom grows. The Apostle Paul put it this way; “God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.”

## PROVIDENTIAL PARABLES

One of the problems with parables and allegories is that we have a tendency to reduce the gospel message to a maxim, to an “old saying”. For example, we say, “Mighty oaks from little acorns grow.”

And the moral of that story is that big things sometimes come from small beginnings.

But, we are saying much more than that today. We are not talking about natural growth. We are talking about the miraculous Providence of Almighty God. We are saying that God makes things happen for the good of His people.

We are saying that God is at work in our world in many ways, some big and some small. And quite often God chooses to work through the small things, the mustard seed, the sprig planted on the mountaintop and the person who doesn't seem all that important.

It's God's way of reminding us that it doesn't depend upon us but upon Him.

When I look back on my life I often see that God used a seemingly small and random moment in a mighty way. And the “moral” of that story is that in God's kingdom there are no small random moments.

Every moment is important because God is still establishing his kingdom.

God is still bringing word of salvation. God is still bringing a word of hope in a time of despair. God is still bringing a word of forgiveness to the sinner. God is still providing refuge for those who need it most.

God is still working in your life and mine. When our world is coming apart in the valley, God is still planting on the mountaintop.

And when God plants it really is a miracle grow! God tells us through the prophet Isaiah that the word that comes from God's mouth will not return to him empty, but will accomplish what he desires. (Isaiah 55:11)

## THE EARLY CHURCH

I'm sure that many in the early church must have been quite discouraged at times. Their numbers were small. Their influence seemed meager. There was every indication that this religious "cult" would be destroyed by a hostile world.

I am reminded of Paul's poignant last words to Timothy, "... Everyone has deserted me." Paul wasn't exaggerating. When he wrote his letter to Timothy he was in prison awaiting execution. Churches that he had planted were self-destructing. Many were forsaking the faith under the threat of persecution.

No one came to Paul's defense. It looked like all the hard work of this great missionary would be for nothing.

But, Paul didn't see it that way. Paul didn't believe the kingdom depended upon his success or the success of the churches that he planted. Paul believed the kingdom depended upon God's will and God's power.

And so Paul said at the end of his life in the most discouraging of circumstances, "I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness." (2 Timothy 4:7b-8a) "The Lord stood with me, and strengthened me, in order that the proclamation might be fully accomplished ..." (2 Timothy 4:17a)

In other words Paul believed that God's salvation was stronger than the treachery of men and women. Paul believed that come what may God's will would be done and God's kingdom would come.

That's our message for today. The forces of exile will not have the final word. God will have the final word.

## THE SPRIG PLANTED ON CALVARY'S MOUNT

I wonder if there are people here today who are living in exile? I wonder if there are people here today who are hungry for a word of hope? I wonder if there are people here today who live life in the valley, captured by the greed and corruption of a world gone mad?

Today God invites us to come home. God reminds His exiled children that He Himself has planted a sprig of hope on the mountaintop. And that sprig has blossomed into a noble tree.

Ezekiel didn't know it when he wrote this allegory long ago, but we know.

The sprig of hope is in the form of a cross. It was planted on a mount called Calvary. And from that tender shoot a mighty tree has grown.

People from all over the world have come to that tree to receive God's forgiveness. The exiles have come home. Those who were dead in sin have been given new life.

The Psalmist wrote, "I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth."

That's what I want you to do today. I want you to lift up your eyes to the mountain of God's promise. I want you to take refuge in that noble cedar that grows on Mount Zion.

I want you to think about the salvation that God promises instead of dwelling on the problems that threaten to overwhelm you. In other words, I want you to look up instead of about. And I want you to point others to that same mountain of glory.

#### THE EXAMPLE OF A FATHER

Today is father's day, and I would be remiss not to mention him. My father is the one who first pointed me toward the mountaintop of God's salvation. He taught me the basics of the gospel.

He was very involved in our small church. He sang in the choir. He led the youth group. He taught Sunday school. He stoked the coal fire in the church every day. He cleaned the building.

You name it. He did it.

But, what really impressed me about my father was how he lived ... with a sense of humor and a zest for living that I wanted to copy. He always had an inner peace and strength. He was compassionate to everyone he met.

I always had a feeling that dad was looking beyond the present moment to something greater. He taught me by the way he lived what it meant to look up instead of about.

And I think that's what our heavenly Father wants us to do.

He wants us to look toward the mountaintop where the sprig of hope is planted and where the mighty tree grows. He wants us to trust in His goodness and His grace.

Amen.

Let us pray.

Our Heavenly Father,

You have loved us so much that you sent your Son, Jesus to save us from our sinful ways. And now Lord you have promised your Holy Spirit wherever we are gathered. We praise your name for such precious gifts.

We confess that often we act as if your Spirit is not with us. Instead of looking up to your promises we look about; we focus on the troubles instead of the promises. We are afraid and run from the jobs you give us to do. We forget that the establishment of your kingdom is sure. Remind us of your power and love for us, and forgive our sinful unbelief.

Thank you for this community of faith. Thank you for fathers who have guided us and supported us along the way. Help us support and strengthen our families that we may raise children who have faith and bring glory to your name.

Many of our brothers and sisters find themselves in exile this day. Sorrow, sickness and quiet despair fill the lives of so many. Wipe away tears. Bring hope to those who have lost heart. Give us a sign of that great day when we see your glory clearly and be reunited with those that we love.

We ask this and more in the name of Jesus. Amen.