

“A Growth Spurt”
Pentecost 2b Proper 6
Mark 4:26-34

Pastor Bruce K Modahl
Grace Lutheran Church
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In Jesus' Name.

In a Bible commentary, a theologian named Henry Brinton gives a title to Ezekiel 17, which is our first reading today. He calls it “A Tale of Two Trees.” That is a clever play on Charles Dickens’ novel *A Tale of Two Cities*. Dickens’ two cities are London and Paris at the time of the French revolution. Ezekiel’s two trees are Babylon and Judah. Ezekiel portrays them as cedars. Cedars of Lebanon were the tallest, strongest and noblest of trees known to Ezekiel. The prophet calls out, “Thus says the Lord God: I will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar, plant it on Mt. Zion (where the temple stood before the armies of Babylon burned it down). It will produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. I bring low the high tree. (that would be Babylon.) I make high the low tree (namely Judah). Thus says the Lord.

Brinton continues the theme with Psalm 92. He gives it the title “A Tree Grows in Jerusalem,” playing on the title of Betty Smith’s 1943 novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. It was widely popular. It was sent to GIs overseas, made into a film in 1945 and a Broadway musical in 1951. There was a revival of it just a few years ago. However, the trees the psalmist spots growing in Jerusalem are not the invasive and commonplace kinds growing in back lots of Brooklyn but the righteous who shall flourish like a palm tree and spread abroad like a cedar of Lebanon.... They shall still bear fruit in old age,” the psalmist promises.

This imagery of planting and growth continues with Jesus’ two short parables in the Gospel reading. Jesus’ subject is greater than the sum of the righteous. What Jesus talks about here is more important than Judah and Babylon added together with all the kingdoms of the earth of all time. Jesus’ subject is the kingdom of God. “The kingdom of God is as if,” Jesus begins. “The kingdom of God is like,” he says. If Judah is like a mighty cedar tree and the righteous like a noble palm tree, with what shall he liken the kingdom of God? Jesus likens it to a mustard

bush. Shrubbery, the kingdom of God is like shrubbery? It may be the largest of bushes but it is still a bush. And yes I know the contrast Jesus draws is between the smallness of the seed compared to what grows from it but don't we get the same contrast from the tender twig God breaks from the lofty top of the cedar, which grows into a mighty tree. There were plenty of oak trees in that place. He could have made the same point with the growth spurt that produces a mighty oak from a tiny acorn. Instead Jesus chooses what is ordinary, the hew bushes gnawed by deer at the back fence, the scraggly holly, spirea by the hundreds, and burning bushes lined up by the thousands in their nondescript green at this time of the year. I don't even know the name of the bushes forming the hedges in our back yard.

Jesus chooses what is lowly, nondescript, ordinary to describe God's kingdom. Some people refer to this season of the church year as Ordinary Time. Calling this a Sunday in Ordinary Time has to do with the word ordinal and the fact that the Sundays are numbered. But I forget this explanation almost as soon as I hear it. When I see these Sundays numbered as Ordinary Time what I think is... well... ordinary. On this ordinary Sunday Jesus likens the kingdom of God to an ordinary bush.

In the Lord's Prayer Jesus taught us to ask, "Thy kingdom come." In the catechism we learn what we already suspect, "God's kingdom comes without our praying for it." So why pray? The catechism goes on to say, "we ask in this prayer that it may come also to us." If it is to come to us it must come low, like a bush. A bush provides shelter for those who cannot soar high enough to gain a perch on the branch of a mighty cedar or towering palm. The bush gives shelter to one whose wing is broken and safety to those with wounded spirits. In its branches nests the sin-sick soul. And within its foliage we are safe.

If the kingdom of God is to come to us it must come low, like a bush, or like Jesus who stooped low to take on our flesh. He gives shelter to the broken and safety to those with wounded spirits. The soul grieving over sin finds refuge in him. In his care we are safe and by his care we

are healed. He became one with us in life and in death so that we might be one with him in resurrection and new life. We heard it this morning from Paul, “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.”

If the kingdom of God is to come to us it must come low, like a bush or like Jesus who took on our flesh or like ordinary words, this word you are hearing right now, which is the incarnate Christ himself. Listen for the kingdom of God in ordinary words used to proclaim Christ for the preached Christ, Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, is “Christ himself walking through his congregation as the Word.”¹

If the kingdom of God is to come to us it must come low, like a bush or like Jesus who took on our flesh or the proclaimed word about him or like ordinary bread and wine and water. God joins his promise to these so that in, with and under the bread and wine we see, touch and taste our crucified and risen Lord, present with us for the forgiveness of our sins. God joins God’s promise to the water of baptism so that like the Hebrew slaves who passed through the waters of the Red Sea from slavery to freedom, we pass through these waters from slavery to sin and death to the joy and freedom of everlasting life.

Jesus calls us to look into the ordinary for the stirrings of “thy kingdom come.” Ordinary and commonplace are conflict, hunger, sickness, and tears enough to go around. We all die. These are ordinary. Look into the ordinary and see when Christ shall come again, stooping low so that where there is conflict, there will be peace, the hungry are satisfied, the sick healed, tears are dried, and those who die in Christ are made alive with Christ.

If the kingdom of God is to come to our troubled world it must come low like a bush or Jesus or the Word or Bread, wine, and water or you and me. The kingdom of God comes to us to enlist us ordinary folk into God’s cause. To what sort of planting shall Jesus liken us? Some

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Wordly Preaching*, ed. Clyde E. Fant, Thomas Nelson Inc., 1975, p. 123. As quoted by William Willimon in *Pulpit Resource*, (Vol. 37, No. 2, Year B, April, May, June 2009), p. 52.

shrubbery no doubt, rooted in Christ, watered by baptism with boughs offering shelter and bearing fruit. Where there is conflict we are peacemakers. The hungry are satisfied by the food we give with our hands and our handwritten letters on behalf of Bread for the World. We encourage the sick with our prayers. By our presence in God's name, we comfort those who mourn. We bring our gifts of money, bread and wine, praise and thanksgiving. God accepts our money, blesses it and parcels it back to us for ministry multiplied in and through this congregation to reach around the world. God receives the bread and wine also brought in the offertory procession and returns these to us as the very means by which God has redeemed us, the body and blood of Jesus. God revels in our praise and thanksgiving. He gladly accepts these gifts but turns them back to us for lives of thanksgiving. We might even call it Eucharistic living since it flows from this table to which the gifts are brought; where they are blessed and broken; and from which they are given.

“The kingdom of God 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.” A bush provides shelter for those who cannot soar high enough to gain a perch on the branch of a mighty cedar or towering palm. The bush gives shelter to one whose wing is broken and safety to those with wounded spirits. In its branches nests those grieving over their sins. And within its foliage we are safe.