

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Proper 6 – Year B

RCL Readings¹ – Ezekiel 17:22-24; Psalm 92: 1-4, 12-15; II Corinthians 5:6-17; Mark 4:26-34

ACNA Readings – Ezekiel 31:1-14; Psalm 92; II Corinthians 5:1-10; Mark 4:26-34

Seasonal Introduction. The Christian calendar revolves around two principal feasts: Christmas (involving Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany) and Easter (involving Lent, Easter, and Pentecost). Then there is a large section in the middle called ordinary time. This season often focuses on the growth of the Church, ending in a season known as Kingdome tide which concludes with the feast of Christ the king. During this time we read and hear the bulk of the teachings of Jesus in relation to the kingdom of heaven and how we are called to live as disciples of the Messiah.²

Common Theme. Figurative language tools like metaphors, allegory and parables are in heavy use throughout today's readings. Most of the readings depict the image of something small, seemingly inconspicuous, growing under the nurture of God to become something large, bold, and obvious. Something that draws attention to the Lord and acts as His witness. The readings describe an interesting relationship whereby the Lord works in us, and in turn that work in us bears fruit for the Lord. We participate, but God gets all the glory.

Hebraic Context. The Biblical account of Genesis begins in a garden, laying down a foundation that intertwines the human story with the flora and fauna of creation. The significant feature of the garden of Eden was what was in the midst of the garden; the Tree of Life and Tree of Good and Evil. These trees presented a choice for the first human couple; whether to obey the voice of the Lord or choose disobedience and the consequences that come from that action.

Trees thereafter held immense significance throughout the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the New Testament Gospels.³ Trees were often used metaphorically or allegorical ways to describe Israel (Ezekiel 17) along with Assyria (Ezekiel 31); they were also used to represent communities and nations and even individuals (Judges 9). In Hosea 14:8, God describes Himself as a green cypress tree from which fruit is found and Jesus stated that He was the 'true vine'. However, trees were not always used in allegory, they were also part of the sacred history of Israel.

¹ Alternate RCL Readings: I Samuel 15:34-16:13; Psalm 20

² Usually from the Synoptic Gospels. This year, year B, the Gospel of Mark is studied. We also study passages with similar themes to the Gospel or go through several books of the Bible (largely from I Samuel-I Kings and the writings from Proverbs, Job, and Ruth in the Alternate reading of year B).

³ Agricultural metaphors were not used in the epistles except when quoting Scripture. Paul, in Galatians, instead uses a mountain in his allegory.

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Trees play an important physical role in this world's ecology.⁴ They are also used throughout the Hebrew Scriptures for spiritual lessons. The ark that saved Noah and his family was made from gopher wood.⁵ The LORD visited Abraham at the Oaks of Mamre. The call of Moses to begin the redemption from the Egyptians occurred from the midst of a burning bush. And the Temple was built from the cedar tree. While allegory is commonly used to teach God's people, the physical world, and agriculture in particular, is not always ignored in favour of spiritual allegory. But that doesn't mean we can't find deep meaning in the things God does within the physical world. God uses both to teach us of His power, goodness, redemption, and even judgment.

Ezekiel 17:22-24. In this portion of Ezekiel, God speaks to and through Ezekiel. God uses riddles and parables in metaphors to show what He will do. In Ezekiel 17:22-24 God used the picture of a cedar tree to promise that He would intervene in human affairs. God will cut off the top of the cedar (רָרָא *erez*), a physically large tree.⁶

The context of the earlier parable in Ezekiel 17:3-18 is that Judah, even after they were defeated and surrendered to Babylon, turned around and rebelled against Babylon. They could not succeed and would die in the land of their enemies. If Babylon took a sprig from the top of the tree to replant it (Ezekiel 17:4–6) it failed. Not because it could not thrive where it was planted but because of Israel's rebellion—not only against Babylon but also against God. Now, it is God who will take a sprig from the cedar and replant it.

The Lord will “crop off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one”. This small cutting is called יוֹנֶקֶת *yōneqet* and comes from the word תִּינוֹק *tinok*, or baby. Ezekiel describes this small branch being planted by the Lord, and though small, it will grow, bear fruit, provide shade and become strong. This new majestic tree will receive homage and adoration from other trees and, more importantly, will witness for the Lord.

⁴ Trees and plants are used throughout the Scriptures for food and cooking, for clothing, and medicine. They are used in the practices around writing, art, perfumes, and in architecture. They are also used in illustrations and parables. They show the blessings and curses of God. Over 100 different plants (or their use) are named in the Bible, although there are over 2,500 native species of flora in Israel alone.

⁵ Christian Orthodox tradition states that the olive branch brought back by the dove was planted by Noah. The tree grew and flourished, only to eventually be used as the cross of the crucifixion.

⁶ Israel, along with Egypt and Jordan, were not known for having trees useful for building. Cedar's were considered extremely useful due to their rarity, which is why Jeremiah 22:7 is such a stark statement from God, “and they shall cut down your choicest cedars and cast them into the fire.” The cedar was almost exclusively from a foreign nation, the land of the Phoenicians, and had to be imported to Israel.

The Cedar was a tree often connected with blessing and beauty. Numbers 24:6 includes the cedar with both concepts of beauty and blessing from God. The cedar, specifically from Lebanon, was used to build royal houses of Israel and Solomon's Temple (and even, to the best of their ability, the 2nd Temple).

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Who is this small tender shoot of the cedar? The parable may refer to the people of God, Israel, whom God remains in covenant with. It could also refer to individuals.⁷ One of the individuals may even be the Messiah. Both Israel and the Messiah certainly testify to the truth of God.

The Lord, in His sovereignty, acted personally, carefully, and deliberately. He chose the branch from the tree. He chose where to plant it—on a prominent mountain in Israel, and He provided the means to make that which was dry flourish with green new life. Something that was small and insignificant grew and flourished in God's hands—bearing witness to the Lord.⁸

Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15.⁹ ¹⁰ Psalm 92 is unique amongst the Psalms in that it is the only psalm entitled “a Song for the Sabbath.” The psalm itself never mentions Sabbath beyond Psalm 92:1. While it doesn't have this obvious connection to Shabbat it starts with the need to take time to declare our thanks to God in songs of praise and declaration.

In antiquity, worship was conducted in the temple every day of the week.¹¹ Perhaps this psalm became part of the special Sabbath liturgy.¹² Psalm 92 is a praise to God for His special characteristics of loving-kindness and faithfulness. It begins with a simple yet profound opening line, “It is good to give thanks to the Lord.” Verse 4 reminds us that we are glad and joyful

⁷ *Genesis Rabbah* 53.1, along with *Aggadat Bereshit* 29.3 and Midrash Tanhuma 15.1, provides a long list of heroes and villains throughout Genesis and Samuel that could be referenced by God in this parable.

⁸ Throughout the Scriptures we see God choose something that is weak, poor, or unimportant and lift them up. This isn't just the case with Israel, although it is (you were least among the nations); it isn't just the case with Tamar, Rahab, or Ruth (who were all prominent in the line of the Messiah); and it isn't just the case with the disciples (who, though fishermen and tax collectors, witnessed the resurrection of Jesus and proclaimed it to all nations); but it is also the case for us.

“For consider your calling brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’” (I Corinthians 1:26-31)

⁹ ACNA Readings: Psalm 92

¹⁰ According to Jewish tradition Psalm 92 and 139 were first declared by Adam as he experienced his first Shabbat. *Genesis Rabbah* 22.13, “Rabbi Levi said: Adam the first man said this Psalm, but it was forgotten from his generation...” While Psalm 139 focused on the creation of a person and darkness (something Adam would never have experienced before his first night) Psalm 92 focused on praising God for all the wonders of creation that he now had the time to embrace and experience.

¹¹ Tractate *Rosh Hashanah* 31a.6 states that Psalm 92 is recited on Shabbat as, in the future, all the day (or every day) will be Shabbat.

¹² Today, Psalm 92 is read three times in Jewish liturgies on the Sabbath.

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because of what the Lord has done. His deeds and acts of kindness cause us to be joyful and respond in praise.

While (perhaps) not impossible, it would be hard for us to worship the Lord had he not actually done anything. On Shabbat we are to remember what God did, the creation of the world and redemption of man. God's great works aren't even limited to creation and the redemption of Israel from slavery—they are ongoing and present.

God redeemed us and blessed us. Psalm 92 used nature and the metaphor of trees planted in the House of the Lord, continuing to bear fruit into old age, to show God's many blessings. The trees and the fruit, metaphors for the people of God (the righteous, Psalm 92:12) are nourished by courts of the Lord. How, exactly, is not described, but perhaps by the very presence of God or, in our case, the presence of the Spirit of God. We praise God because God acts with great works, goodness, and faithfulness and God blesses those who declare the work of God and His righteousness with thanksgiving. And, come next week, on Shabbat we'll repeat the process as we continue to see, and proclaim, God's work.

II Corinthians 5:6-17. Following Paul's first exhortation to not lose heart in II Corinthians 4:16, despite the persecution and because the same God who raised Jesus from the dead will also bring us into His presence, Paul continues with "...we are always of good courage." Or, we have great confidence, a word Paul will use five times in II Corinthians.¹³ Where does this confidence come from?

Of course, the Holy Spirit that indwells us gives us confidence as He was given as a guarantee,¹⁴ but we still walk by faith and not by sight. We can be confident as well because, should we die (and we will), being away from our body means we will be at home with the LORD. But again, should that bring us confidence? After all, the Messiah is also the judge.

God knows us. That should cause us fear. Not fear the afflictions and persecutions, those can only cause us to lose our outer self. We should fear the Lord. That does not mean we sit at home and do nothing.¹⁵ Confidence in a future resurrection and presence with the creator of the universe, combined with proper fear, should energize us for ministry in the here and now.

¹³ θάρρω, II Corinthians 5:6, 5:8, 7:16, 10:1, and 10:2.

¹⁴ Ephesians 1:13-14; II Corinthians 1:20-22, 5:5; or, in a more generic sense Genesis 38:17-20 (along with Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists*, 13.50, 13.68 where it is used in a similar sense to Genesis 38).

¹⁵ Matthew 25:18, 24-30 makes it very clear that fearing God is not enough. We must act according to the way that the master works, both planting seed and reaping (even where seed is not sown).

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We are to do everything we can to please God.¹⁶ Walking by faith and not by sight is one of the hardest, yet profoundly powerful, principles of the Kingdom. We believe and act and, in some cases, suffer for God (whom we have not seen). This does not mean we do not see the acts of the Lord working in our lives nor his handiwork in creation. Jewish literature often employs the term “walk” to speak of someone’s conduct or behaviour. This is called *halacha* from the verb ‘to walk’. This is not to be confused with works-righteousness. No one is advocating earning one’s salvation, however, walking by faith is still walking. Paul does not admonish us to sit by faith. Our confidence, our walk of faith, including our actions, bear witness that we are indeed new creations. Though we have not seen the Lord, we know the fear of the Lord, and this prompts us to “try to persuade others.” We have confidence in the future and the courage to witness today.

Mark 4:26-34. Our Gospel portion includes two parables with the parable of the growing seed being unique to the gospel of Mark.¹⁷ These two particular parables portray a slow and almost hidden dynamic to the Kingdom of Heaven. Many of us want to see the explosive dramatic expansion in our churches, but rarely are we content with measured growth. Many Jewish people at the time of Jesus also looked for the powerful, dramatic, and divine intervention of God’s Kingdom. The hope was for a political messianic redeemer who would throw off the shackles of Roman occupation, bringing freedom and independence for the nation state of Israel. The majority of the Jewish population did not anticipate the small, tiny, almost inconspicuous messianic community of the Jesus – movement to be God’s plan.

The parable of the growing seed also reveals the cooperative aspect of salvation, that is, that there is a participatory action on our part in the plan of God. The farmer plants the seed, and God grows the seed without the farmer necessarily knowing how it all works. The Greek word that describes this action is *αὐτομάτη* (*automatos*) from where we get the word automation. The seed grows automatically and bears fruit without the farmer's effort, yet the farmer was the one who planted the seed in the first place.

We all fit aptly into this picture. We have been given the Holy Spirit and a commission from the Messiah to go into all the world and to witness for him. We are to plant the seeds of the Kingdom, but we don’t see how it all works. We know that it does work, for we can see the fruit of the Good News. What began as a few hundred Jews in the Jesus movement has now

¹⁶ Paul uses the same word, *ευαρεστος*, in Romans 12:1-2 “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

¹⁷ Parables are a unique literary device in Jewish teaching. They only occur in the Gospels and in rabbinic literature. They are not found in the Jewish diaspora nor in the writings of Paul. Parables appear to be a very localized form of teaching, and all 436 known parables are in Hebrew. While Jesus may have commonly spoken both Aramaic and Greek, He would have taught parables in Hebrew.

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encompassed the globe with more than two billion adherents. This is the glory of the Father's work in us.

Hebraic Perspective. Following the week of creation, Adam was tasked with tending the garden that had been planted by God. God tells him he can freely eat of every tree in the garden, except for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for to eat of that tree would be to die. God also asks Adam to name all the animals.

There is a midrash that says that God was deeply interested in the names Adam had for all the animals and that after Adam had named them all, He asked Adam what His name was! Adam was such an important part of the process that he was given the responsibility to give God a name.¹⁸ The point of the midrash is to demonstrate the partnership that God has with Man in His creation.

God began the world but humans were tasked with its care and growth. The garden was not only to be maintained but to expand and grow. God is light but it was Israel that was called to be a light to the nations. The Gentiles would know about God through Israel, not only through God Himself. The same pattern is found in the teachings of Jesus and the kingdom of Heaven. Jesus is the good news, however the gospel is proclaimed not by Jesus or His angels but through the work of His disciples. This does not imply that God is aloof, uninvolved or doing nothing. Much of His work is unseen and none of that which is unseen removes our obligations to partake in the work of the kingdom. The great commission is to go into all the world, not to wait for the Lord to do everything!

ACNA Readings

Ezekiel 31:1-14. Egypt stood as one of the mightiest kingdoms under the Kings and Pharaohs for thousands of years. But Egypt also played an important role in the birth of the nation of Israel. The people of God had grown and flourished in Egypt, initially as free settlers and later as a slave nation. The exodus from Egypt was the greatest act of redemption in the sacred history of the Jewish people.¹⁹ In the future, Egypt will continue to play a role in redemptive history.²⁰

Although the prophecy in Ezekiel 31 was declared against Assyria, the example was a warning to the Pharaoh and his people. In Ezekiel 17 the cedar tree עֵץ אֶרֶץ *erez* was a metaphor for Israel,

¹⁸ A midrash is a story that is not true but should teach us something that is true.

¹⁹ Jeremiah 16:14-15 reminds us that God continues to redeem His people. Egypt was, perhaps, the greatest act of redemption, but in other times and places God's redemption of Israel in their own time be a powerful declaration of God's continued mercy and power.

²⁰ According to the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 19:22-24) the Lord will heal Egypt and join the lands of Egypt, Israel and Assyria together as a blessing to the earth.

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here the cedar becomes the metaphor for Assyria while Egypt was reminded they are not any greater than Assyria.

In the image presented by Ezekiel the great tree flourishes through the “rivers running around the place where it was planted”. The Assyrian economy was supported by the waters of the Euphrates and Tigris (just as Egypt was supported by the Nile), providing the empire with agricultural fertility and food to support a burgeoning population and industrial war machine.²¹ Ezekiel describes the Assyrian tree as greater than all other trees or nations. Yet despite its power and opulence the author of its greatness was God. “No tree in the garden of God was like it in beauty. I made it beautiful with a multitude of branches, so that all the trees of Eden envied it that were in the garden of God.”

Ezekiel charges the Assyrian empire with hubris and pride which brings divine wrath. The judgment of the Lord is not forthcoming from the angelic host but brought about from other human empires. “I will deliver it into the hand of the mighty one of the nations, and he shall surely deal with it”. Historically speaking, Assyria fell to the Babylonian empire under the cruel hand of Nebuchadnezzar. Egypt, like all empires, needed to understand that, as powerful and mighty as they might be, they are still under the authority of heaven as much as Israel and the people of God.

²¹ Empires that have access to a constant water source can grow food to support a large population. A large population, in turn, can support a large army. With a large army an empire can expand. The initial environmental condition for an empire was access to water.