

4th Sunday after Pentecost

Ezekiel 17:22-24

Sermon #694

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22 Thus says the Lord GOD: "I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. 23 On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest. 24 And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it."

In the name of our life-giving God, dear friends and fellow redeemed,

Trees are important parts of God's creation, aren't they? Life depends on them. They provide life to birds and animals as they provide food and shelter. Human life would cease if there were not trees and vegetation, for they produce the oxygen we need for life. Trees played a prominent role even in the Garden of Eden. Two particular trees were mentioned in the creation account. We know the one all too well, the one that proved to be Adam and Eve's downfall: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But another tree is mentioned in the account that doesn't get very much attention. Also at the middle of the garden was this tree, from which Adam and Eve were allowed to eat. It was the Tree of Life. After the fall into sin, when Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden they were denied access to that Tree of Life. But their Creator God demonstrated His love and mercy in that He promised another Tree of Life. The Lord, through His prophet Ezekiel, spoke of Him. That Tree of Life is Jesus, the promised Savior from sin, death and hell.

Five hundred fifty years before Jesus was planted in this world Ezekiel spoke of Him as a tree, the tree of life. What good news this was for Ezekiel's listeners and readers! What good news it is for us that ...

JESUS IS THE TREE OF LIFE!

1. Planted by the LORD.
2. Producing branches and fruit.

With this picture prophecy through Ezekiel, the LORD continued to make the promise that out of death caused by sin He would bring life for His people. This was the same promise He made to sinful Adam and Eve when He said to Satan, **"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."** (Genesis 3:15).

This picture prophecy was a continuation of the promise made two thousand years before to Abram: **"I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."** (Genesis 12:3). This tree of life prophecy continued the promise as given to the Jewish people through the prophet Micah: **But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.** (Micah 5:2).

This was good news for the people of every age to whom these prophecies were given. Ezekiel's people needed desperately to hear this good news of the Savior. They needed to have restated for them the promise that the LORD would bring life out of death. You see, they were sure their nation was dead. They were being held captive in Babylon (that's modern day Iraq). Many were sure that they wouldn't be returning to Judah and Jerusalem. They also saw that their king who still sat in Jerusalem had no power to bring about change. King David's descendants no longer led God's people in His ways, which resulted in their inability to do what was good for the people. King Zedekiah, still in Jerusalem, tried in his own way to gain freedom for his people. Refusing to accept the captivity as the LORD's call to repentance, Zedekiah sought an alliance with the Egyptians to try to overpower Babylon. Earlier in this prophecy, though, the LORD made it clear that His people would gain freedom from captivity His way. The LORD would do it. Notice all the "I's" in

this section. **“I myself will take a sprig... I will break off... I myself will plant it... I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish... I will do it”** From the dying royal line of a nation wandering to its death the LORD would "plant" a Living One, a descendant of King David who loves and trusts the LORD. The LORD's rescue begins with Him bringing His people to a recognition of their rebellion against Him. And that was the purpose of their captivity in Babylon. To get them to see the dead end they were heading for if they continued on their way without Him. For those who despaired because of their sins, Ezekiel's picture of the tree planting was indeed good news! The LORD promised to take a shoot or sprig from the top of the tree of King David's royal line and plant it back among His people. **“On the mountain heights of Israel”**, he said. They would be home with their Savior God! And that meant more than just a return to the physical city of Jerusalem. It meant a return to God's presence as enjoyed by Adam and Eve! It meant life forever with the LORD! Yes, to those captives the LORD promised that He would plant another Tree of Life, a Living One who would bring life out of death.

Our gracious Lord of Life makes the same promise to captives today. What events and circumstances in your life seem to hold you captive and are being used by the LORD as His tool for making us recognize our waywardness? Some of us might feel captive to financial difficulties, struggling to make ends meet. Others of us might feel captive to strained relationships in our family life. In our place of employment? And maybe there are some of us who feel like we're held captive by a weak, ill or even dying body? There is a struggle that hold every one of us captive in life.

And what rebellions against the LORD does He want us to recognize and confess through these captivities? Perhaps there are many of us who, like the people of Judah before their captivity, get too worried about financial prosperity while not being very concerned about the spiritual and eternal prosperity to be had in Jesus. Perhaps those of us who are held captive by relationship tensions have failed to appreciate Jesus' love and forgiveness for our shortcomings, and

have failed to apply Jesus' love and forgiveness to those with whom we have relationships. And what about those of us held captive by ill, weakening bodies? For some, maybe the LORD wants us to see that we aren't taking care of these bodies and lives as He wants. And for others of us, maybe we aren't putting things in His mighty hands and accepting His good, gracious and eternal will? The LORD keeps allowing such captivities all our days, as the apostle Paul pointed out in our Epistle lesson from 2 Corinthians 5, this body and life is a temporary dwelling. But to us who are captives to sin and its consequences the LORD has a most wonderful message and promise! Jesus is your Tree of Life! The LORD planted Him in this life, in a dead little town within the borders of the seemingly dead people of Judah. That Tree of Life grew, bringing blessings. He died under God's judgment of our rebellions on a cross carved from a tree, and through His death we were brought to life. And with His resurrection from death He assured that we enjoy now and forever the blessings of His life. And this is the LORD's doing! He has made Jesus the Tree of Life for all, not only planted by the LORD, but also producing branches and fruit.

Jesus Himself in our Gospel lesson (Mark 4:26-34) revealed that Ezekiel's prophecy about the LORD's "tree planting" activity was about Him. When Jesus was "planted" into our world and lived perfectly for us and died, He rescued and brought eternal safety for the people of His world. The picture Jesus painted in Mark 4 shows Him and those who have life through Him. The mustard plant, he said, grows into the largest of garden plants, providing food and shelter to many birds. Jesus provides marvelous blessings to people as the mustard plant provides blessings to birds seeking food and shelter. He provides what we need for life eternal. He provides protection from God's judgment on our rebelliousness. He provides shelter from the attacks of the devil. He provides nourishment for faithful in His work on our behalf.

But the neat thing in Ezekiel's prophetic picture of Jesus, the Tree of Life, is that the LORD there calls it a "cedar". What comes to mind from the Bible when we talk about cedar trees? Is it not those "Cedars

of Lebanon" that were regarded as some of the finest wood in the world? And weren't those Cedars of Lebanon the source of the wood to be used in the temple of the LORD built by Solomon? That cedar wood was to be in the temple of God, in His presence, in the place where He promised to meet and bless His people! That cedar wood honored God! This Cedar pictured by Ezekiel is Jesus and His "family tree"! The Cedar foreseen by Ezekiel is the "Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints" honoring God. You are branches in that cedar! And as branches produced by Jesus, the Tree of Life, you not only receive life, but also provide the blessings of the Tree of Life to many others! Through Ezekiel the LORD says, **"And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest."** You and I as branches grafted into Jesus, the Tree of Life, have shelter and nourishment to share with many other people. You have Jesus and His forgiveness to share. We have shelter to offer people who are burning in the guilt-producing and false security giving natural religions of the human heart. In His word and sacrament around which we gather for nourishment and security Jesus' provides "fruit" of blessing for all.

There are people you know who are held captive by many of the same sins and consequences we mentioned before. A life of captivity to sin without Jesus' forgiveness and promise is a dead end. That's why it is so important that we branches of the Tree of Life branch out with His gifts. The importance of sharing Jesus with others makes another activity very important in our lives: our own spiritual growth. It's very important that each of us be filling up with a knowledge of Jesus' word to be able to speak about Him to those seeking shelter and nourishment for their souls. Study of that word individually and together will prepare us.

So, what terrific news Ezekiel's picture prophecy is for us! He speaks to us who are often held captive to sorrow, despair and self-pity because of our sin or our circumstances. He takes us back to our "roots", to Jesus our Tree of Life who was planted by the LORD and who is still producing branches and fruit. Amen.