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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
Lectionary 11B, June 16, 2024
Ezekiel 17:22-24, Mark 4:26-34
Shelter under God's Tree

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's Bible Lessons invite us to consider trees. Our First Lesson — our reading from Ezekiel 17 — speaks of a noble cedar tree. Under that tree all kinds of beasts of the field and birds of the air will find shelter. Today's Psalm compares righteous people to a palm tree and a cedar of Lebanon. The righteous shall flourish like those trees. And in our Gospel Lesson, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a tiny mustard seed that grows into a huge shrub. The birds of the air can make their nests in the shade of that big shrub.

All three of these Bible passages speak well of trees. When it comes to the BIG topic... when it comes to speaking of the kingdom of God and of the outcome of history, the Bible likes to speak of trees and the shelter they give.

Long ago, when our family was leaving Pennsylvania and preparing to move here to New York City, I warned our sons, who were little boys back then, that in New York City we would not find many trees. But of course, there are lots of trees in New York City, and our boys were quick to point that out to me. Every time they would see a tree here in town, they would say that I was wrong. We have trees along our side streets. We have trees up and down Park Avenue, and of course we have lots of magnificent trees in Central Park. Also, where Carol and I live up in the Bronx, we have awesome trees along Moshulu Parkway and the Botanical Garden.

Who does not love a tree? They are one of God's great creations. When I was a boy growing up on Maryland's Eastern Shore, we did not have much air conditioning back then. But we did have trees. And I spent a right fair amount of my summertime leaning back against a tree and reading, or resting in the branches of a tree, reading. For me, an image of prosperity was that I would grow up and have my own English Walnut tree. I've always loved those English walnuts. Along Bilbrough Lane, where my family lived, we had black walnut trees, we had the "piney forest" where my sister and brother and I liked to play, and we had the huckleberry woods, where my grandfather and I used to pick huckleberries. Trees are great!

Let's consider trees in the Bible by beginning with our Ezekiel reading from Chapter 17. I need to back up a bit in that Chapter in order to lift up how dramatic our short reading is. In the first part of Ezekiel 17, the prophet speaks of an eagle. And so we read these words:

Thus says the Lord GOD: A great eagle with great wings and long pinions, rich in plumage of many colors, came to Lebanon and took the top of the cedar; ⁴he broke off the topmost of its young twigs and carried it to a land of trade... (Ezekiel 17:3-4, RSV)

The prophet then uses the image of the eagle and the young tree to criticize the foreign policy of Judah's king Zedekiah. When King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon installed Zedekiah as vassal king of Judah, he required Zedekiah to render an oath of allegiance to Babylon. Zedekiah gave this oath in the name of the LORD. But now Zedekiah is conspiring with the king of Egypt to rebel against Babylon. This was both politically foolish and spiritually offensive, since it meant breaking an alliance sealed by the name the LORD.¹ So, Ezekiel uses the image of the eagle and the young tree to criticize this foreign policy.

But the great thing about our reading, Ezekiel 17:22-24, is that the LORD takes off the gloves and reveals that *he* is the eagle. Notice the words "I myself" in this passage:

²²Thus 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 upon a high and lofty mountain; ²³on the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bring forth boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar; and under it will dwell all kinds of beasts; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest. (Ezekiel 17:22-23, RSV)

In this passage, the LORD sets aside all foolish human strategies, and tells us that there is coming a day when he will take charge of things. A day of shelter and shade is coming. It is coming for birds of every sort, and all the other trees of the field — that is, all the nations of the world — will acknowledge that noble cedar planted by God. The Church believes that this noble cedar has in fact been planted. It was planted when Jesus was born. He is the noble cedar who will bring shelter and shade to a weary world.

Next, let me speak briefly of our Psalm. As I read a verse or two, please notice how *definite* the passage is when speaking about the righteous. The passage says that things "shall" happen:

¹¹The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree,

¹Jenson, Robert W., *Ezekiel* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, 2009) (Kindle Locations 2606-2608). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

and shall spread abroad like a cedar of Lebanon.
¹²Those who are planted in the house of the LORD
shall flourish in the courts of our God;
¹³they shall still bear fruit in old age;
they shall be | green and succulent;

Notice the tone of energy and determination in these words. Notice that word “shall”: “the righteous *shall* flourish like a palm tree.” In an uncertain world, who of us can be so confident in saying what shall or shall not be? I mean we make our plans, and well we should make our plans, but always our plans have the proviso, “the good Lord willing.” Or, if we are not religious, we still tend to add a proviso, “if the creeks don’t rise.” But our Psalm is not hesitant. It does not say about the righteous that they “might” flourish or that they “sometimes” flourish. Rather our Psalm just goes ahead and blurts it out: the righteous *shall* flourish.

So, why is our Psalm so confident about the matter? Well, it goes back to Ezekiel’s saying about the eagle. The Lord GOD himself is the eagle. The Lord GOD himself shall plant a noble cedar under which all kinds of creatures will flourish. Our Psalm points to one group of those creatures: the righteous. The righteous *shall* flourish because they shall enjoy the shelter and shade of Jesus.

Now, let’s turn to our Gospel Lesson about the mustard seed. I looked up “mustard seeds” on Wikipedia.² They are indeed very small, maybe 1/16 of an inch. And they do grow up to be shrubs. It takes them about 85-95 days to mature. The mustard seed is a symbol of something that is small and insignificant, but with the potential to grow and become big. So is the Kingdom of God, Jesus says. It might start off small, but it will grow. Jesus would have us trust him on that. That tiny mustard seed shall grow and put forth large branches “so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

Jesus began with twelve disciples. But those unlettered fishermen conquered much of the world. The mustard seed has grown. The Church has won people to Christ all over the earth. The Church has won people to Christ here in our land and in our city. If at any point in history, the Church should seem small and in decline, we should be pleased to think of that mustard seed. Jesus says that it will grow and provide shelter, and so it most certainly will.

The common idea in our three lessons is shelter. God himself is taking charge of his world to make sure that we find some shelter in life in the end. The birds shall have large branches on which they can make their nests in the shade. All kinds of beasts and birds of every sort shall have some peace under the noble cedar planted by God himself. They shall have rest with Jesus.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mustard_seed

When I first read through today's lessons, I found myself thinking about Hamlet's line about "The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune."³ There certainly are such slings and arrows. You might even be suffering some of them these days. It is hard to go through life in this fallen world without suffering some setbacks and threats. It is hard to live without from time to time wanting to cry out, "Just give me some peace! Just give me some shelter!"

Today is Father's Day. Many of us had good fathers. But from time to time it comes the way of even good fathers that they must work their way through a hard stretch of life. Maybe they suffer a financial setback. Maybe they suffer a stretch of bad health. Maybe the boss is placing demands on them that seem overwhelming. They worry. The worry not especially for themselves, but for the family and for people dear to them. Things have so conspired that they could cry out, "Just give me some peace!" Life is not flowing along easily for them.

Think of Jacob when he is an old man. In our Thursday Evening Bible Study these days, we are reading about Joseph down in Egypt. We have reached the stage where Pharaoh has appointed Joseph Governor of all Egypt. Joseph is thirty years old, and he is flourishing. But back home in the Promised Land, his old father is grieving. His other sons have deceived him. They have sold Joseph into slavery down in Egypt, but have told old Jacob that a wild animal has killed Joseph. They dip the boy's robe of many colors in blood and bring it to their father. Then we read of Jacob's grief:

³³And he recognized it [the robe] and said, "It is my son's robe; a wild beast has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces." ³⁴Then Jacob rent his garments, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days. ³⁵All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." Thus his father wept for him. (Genesis 37:33-34, RSV)

The old man can hardly imagine ever have peace again. But he does.

And think of the father in the story of the Prodigal Son. His younger son has taken his inheritance and moved on to a foreign land, where he wastes his substance in riotous living. But the father waits. He seems to be standing there, searching the horizon for his wandering son. It is a hard stretch of life for him. But at last he has peace again. He sees his son off in the distance. He gathers up his robes and runs on his elderly legs to embrace his son. The hard times have at last been replaced by joy.

³ *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 1.

The Lord can do these things. He can bring sorrow to an end. He can give us some shade against the noonday sun. He can give us some shelter. The prophet Isaiah speaks of these things. He speaks of the willingness of God to give us some help. And so we read:

⁴For thou hast been a stronghold to the poor,
a stronghold to the needy in his distress,
a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat; (Isaiah 25:3-4, RSV)

Next, let me lift up two verses from a Psalm that is dear to many of us — Psalm 121. It too speaks of shelter:

⁵The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade
on your right hand.
⁶The sun shall not smite you by day,
nor the moon by night. (Psalm 121, RSV)

Finally, let me speak of the New Jerusalem and of the shade we will find under the tree of life. Back in the Garden of Eden, once we had eaten of the forbidden tree, we not permitted anymore to eat of the tree of life. But one day, we will. It lies ahead of us. It is a great thing to look forward to. So, here is a beautiful passage from Revelation 22, about the New Jerusalem:

¹Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. ³There shall no more be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall worship him; ⁴they shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads. ⁵And night shall be no more; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign for ever and ever. (Revelation 22:1-5, RSV)

You fathers, remember these things. You mothers too. The blazing sun shall not always smite you. Hard times shall not continue forever. Be faithful in all the days granted to you — both the hard seasons of life and the seasons of peace and spiritual renewal. Be faithful come what may. A noble cedar is

ahead of you. It shall give you some peace, some shade, and some rest — it will give you all you need. Jesus is going to see to it. And to him be the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.