

TREE OF THE LORD'S PLANTING

Lenten Midweek 5—March 25, 2020

Psalm 104:10–18 (antiphon v 16); Ezekiel 17:1–24; Mark 4:30–32

“From tiny acorns grow great oaks,” so they say.

That may be, but the process never just happens.

What we take to be simple and common acts of nature are always really the work of the Creator's hand.

It goes all the way back to the beginning

when Genesis tells us that **“the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east. . . .**

And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food” (Gen 2:8–9).

Tonight, in the seventeenth chapter of Ezekiel,

we heard about a particular tree that the Lord planted.

We'll consider that tree in this fifth sermon

of our special Lenten sermon series, “Living among the Bible's Trees.”

CONSIDERING THE TREE OF THE LORD'S PLANTING,

WE REALIZE THAT, ALTHOUGH WE ARE DISLOYAL AND SIN IN OTHER WAYS,

JESUS SAVES US AND MAKES US TO DWELL SECURELY.

In that reading from Ezekiel, our First Reading tonight,

God uses trees in a figure of speech.

Using a cedar, willow, and vine, God relates recent history allegorically: King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon taking King Jehoiachin of Israel captive and putting his relative Zedekiah in his place, only to have Zedekiah disloyally and unfaithfully seek help from Egypt.

Then God prophesies the consequences of Zedekiah's rebellion.

Finally, using a similar figure of speech,

the Lord God speaks of the tree that he himself will plant,

in order to prophesy the Messiah and his kingdom, the Church.

Since the first man and woman ate of the tree

of the knowledge of good and evil, not only King Zedekiah

but all of us in various ways have been disloyal and unfaithful.

Nebuchadnezzar had Zedekiah swear a loyalty oath in the Lord's name, but Zedekiah broke it.

Instead of faithfully trusting in the Lord even at that point,

Zedekiah sought from Egypt help that never really came.

You and I in our Baptism renounced the devil,
all of his works, and all of his ways,
and at our confirmation we further vowed
to live according to the Word of God and to remain true to him
in faith, word, and deed.

You make vows to spouses,
and we make commitments to family, friends, and employers.

How long do we go before we first
and then repeatedly break such vows and commitments
in thoughts, words, and deeds?

You and I also face consequences for our rebellion against God in all its forms:
we face not an exile in Babylon
but death here in time and torment in hell for eternity.

The 1978 song called “The Trees” by the Canadian rock group Rush
could just as well have been inspired by the First Reading.

In the song, maple trees demand more light from lofty oaks
and eventually form a union and pass a law
that kept the trees equal by hatchet, axe, and saw.

In the First Reading, not a “noble law”
but the Lord brings low the high, proud tree
and makes high the low, humble tree;
the Lord dries up the green tree and makes the dry tree flourish.

Unless we humbly repent and believe,
as the Lord calls and enables us to do,
we will be humiliated at the judgment and for all eternity.

He is the Lord; he has spoken, and he will do it.

So, we humbly turn in sorrow
from our disloyalty and rebellion and from all our sin,
we trust God to forgive our sin,
and we want to do better than to keep on sinning.

When we repent, we receive God’s forgiveness of our sin.
God forgives all our sin, whatever it might be, for Jesus’ sake.

Jesus is the Sprig from the lofty top of the cedar,
the tender topmost of its young twigs,
whom the Lord himself sets out and plants on a high and lofty mountain.

And indeed, the New Testament shows us Jesus on mountains,
such as when he was tempted,
when he was transfigured,

and when he finally comes again with the new Jerusalem.

Jesus is the righteous Branch who saves Judah
and makes Israel to dwell securely (Jer 23:5–6).

The young Plant grew up and was despised and rejected by people,
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

On the cross, he bore our griefs and carried our sorrows,
was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities,
in order to bring us peace with God
and heal us from the eternal death we deserve (Is 53:2–5).

For Jesus' sake, whatever our sin might be, God forgives it all.

The Psalm for this day (Ps 104:10–18) recalls creation
and the Garden of Eden with its parklike plenitude of trees.

The two stanzas of the psalm that we chanted
are the center of the psalm
and tell of the good use to which God puts water,
creating strong trees bursting with life,
hordes of birds and other alpine animals.

We should think of Holy Baptism
and the good use to which God at the font puts water and his Word—
working forgiveness of sins, rescuing us from death and the devil,
and giving eternal salvation
to all who believe the words and promises of God.

Those so baptized live with daily sorrow over their sins
and trust that God forgives their sin,
and as needed they seek out the unique comfort
offered by Holy Absolution from their pastor as from God himself.

And those so baptized live in the shelter of the Church,
sustained on the Church's meal, the Sacrament of the Altar,
bread that is Christ's body and wine that is Christ's blood,
given and shed for the forgiveness of sins for life and salvation.

Considering the tree of the Lord's planting,
we realize that, although we are disloyal and sin in other ways,
Jesus saves us and makes us to dwell securely.

As every bird and winged creature according to its kind
once entered the ark (Gen 7:14),
so we nest in the tree of the Lord's planting,
eating the abundant seed or food it offers.

There is a tendency among some Americans

wrongly to apply to the democratic country that is the United States promises that God made to the theocratic country that once was the Old Testament nation of Israel.

We can and should pray both that our nation as a whole repents and that God richly blesses our nation as he has in the past, but we should not expect the United States to endure forever and to be what Jesus calls the “city set on a hill” (Mt 5:14); that’s more properly Christ’s Church.

We should also not expect even the Church to achieve its greatest glory this side of eternity.

Jesus’ teaching in the Second Reading, the Parable of the Mustard Seed, certainly echoes or alludes to the First Reading from Ezekiel.

The mustard seed was the smallest seed
Palestinian farmers and gardeners knew.

It was proverbial for its smallness as a seed,
but, as a plant, it reportedly could grow to ten or twelve feet tall,
the largest plant in their herb gardens.

So Jesus uses the seed and its God-given growth at least in part to teach that the kingdom of God, that is the Church, starts from seemingly insignificant beginnings, as planted and grown by the Lord’s doing, but eventually gives shelter to people from all nations of the world, ultimately standing gloriously forever in eternity.

Jesus himself is the tree of the Lord’s planting,
and he makes you, his Church, to be that tree as well.

God blesses your “Living among the Bible’s Trees,”
both now and forever,
because He has forgiven you all of your sins
in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.