

Like Cedar  
Ezekiel 17:22-24  
June 13, 2021  
First Presbyterian, Luling

This week, I think I need to start with the title of the sermon. Like cedar. Who wants to be like cedar, anyway? Causes people to sneeze for four to five months straight. Triggers asthma and bronchitis in the process. Takes over pastureland, hogs water, crowds out native grasses and other trees. Those are our automatic thoughts about cedar. We can't transfer those thoughts directly to the biblical cedar tree for a couple of reasons. One, our cedar trees are actually juniper trees, not cedars. And two, the cedars that the Bible most frequently references are "the cedars of Lebanon," which were famous throughout the ancient world and even until today. There's a cedar tree on the Lebanese flag.

The cedars that Ezekiel knew were likely the species that grows in Lebanon, which is right next door to Israel. They grow slowly, and tall, and frequently in groves of closely spaced trees. They are evergreen like our juniper pests. They were famous for being big and impressive trees. Though they're not as tall as the California redwoods, I think they must have had a similar reputation. They were famous for being big and beautiful trees.

The rest of the background information we need is what we already talked about a few weeks ago, when we read the Valley of the Dry Bones story from Ezekiel. It's basically the same situation in this passage. People are being deported to Babylon. Israel is destroyed. The Temple is destroyed. It's a time of terrible upheaval and anxiety and hopelessness.

The first part of chapter seventeen is an extended allegory, in which two eagles transplant cedar tree parts to two different places. Ezekiel then explains the allegory, meaning that each piece of the allegory corresponds to a thing in reality. It's different than a parable, which can mean different things and each piece of a parable doesn't necessarily correspond to some specific thing in reality. Ezekiel explains this extended allegory. The first eagle is Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. And the second is the king of Egypt, who was trying to tempt Israel into an alliance, which God says is a bad idea. I don't want to get too tied up in this first part of the chapter, but we do need to know a little bit, so we can see how our passage is different.

Ours is a different variation of that cedar allegory. In the one we read this morning, God will take a tiny sprig from the top of the cedar and plant it on top of a mountain. There the tree will flourish and will become so large that every kind of bird can find shelter in its branches. And then all the trees of the field will know that God has done this.

The most notable and immediately obvious difference from the first part of the chapter compared to our section is the subject of the sentences. Listen to all the verbs from our three verses. God is the subject of every one of these, sometimes emphasized as "I, myself," in case we forgot who was speaking. Here are the verbs: take, set out, break off, plant, plant, bring low, make high, dry up, make flourish, speak, accomplish. God initiates all of this action, with the new sprig of tree in the new place. No eagle is doing anything here. No people. God starts this tree to grow.

But the tree doesn't grow there just to be pretty and famous and impressive. The tree that God plants will grow so that the birds and winged creatures will have a place to live. The

tree that God plants will grow so that it will bear fruit. The tree has a purpose, and that purpose is bigger than just being a pleasing tree that others admire.

The tree will also somehow further God's purpose, which is describe like this: "I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish." This language and imagery echoes that of Isaiah and other prophets, as well as Mary the mother of Jesus, when she sings that God will fill the poor with good things and send the rich away empty. God's purpose is to bring reversals, turn things upside down.

Let's turn to us. Us as individuals. Us as a congregation. Us as a church—the big concept of church—all of us together. The pandemic has been hard for churches across denominations and traditions and sizes, no question about it. Things aren't as hard as the situation Ezekiel faced, but we have some significant challenges.

But we can count on God acting. Remember all those verbs? God will pick a little tiny sprig and plant it in just the right spot. God will do it.

And the purpose of the church is similar to the purpose of that tree, similar to the purpose of God's people since Abraham. The purpose of the tree is to grow and shelter all the kinds of birds that there are, birds from everywhere. The purpose of Abraham is that he was blessed in order that all the families of the earth would be blessed through him. The purpose of the church is the same: to be a shelter and blessing for all. To bear fruit that can be enjoyed by all. There's no entrance requirements for the birds to build nests in the branches. All are welcome. There's room for everyone.

And everyone will know that God is the one that has done this. Our purpose must align with God's, not only to assure that people of every kind find welcome and shelter, but that purpose of reversals and turning the world upside down is also our calling. That may work against our own interests sometimes, and it may provoke pushback and even stronger resistance. But it's pretty clear throughout scripture that God brings low the high tree and makes high the low tree.

Most important is that all of this activity, our calling and our purpose, is initiated and motivated and created by God and not by us. "I the Lord have spoken. I will accomplish it." Through us and despite us and with our efforts, God will accomplish God's work and purposes. Thanks be to God.