

Sermon: Planted by God

New North Church

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Based on **Ezekiel 17:22-24**; **Mark 4:26-34**

The lectionary gave us two readings today, one about great gnarly trees and the other about large shrubs. For Christians, one reading leads to the other. If you're Jewish, the Ezekiel reading stands on its own.

The immediate context in the Ezekiel reading describes how God is going to make things right. In the wider context of chapter 17, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and the Pharaoh in Egypt are engaged in political maneuvers with and against Israel.

Babylon and Egypt both do to Israel what God eventually does to Babylon, and that is to take a shoot from a cedar tree and transplant it to grow a new tree. It apparently was a common practice for kings in the ancient Near East to gather trees from conquered lands and replant them in their own gardens as a sign of dominance.¹ Except the shoot in our reading comes from Babylon and it gets planted in Israel.

'Thus says the Lord GOD, I am YHWH, I have spoken and I will do it.' The high tree brought low and dried up is Babylon; the low tree made high and nourished is Israel.

The Bible includes a lot of tree imagery. There's the Tree of Life, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and so on. The cedars of Lebanon served as the model for this. They were durable, aromatic, long-lived, and massive.



Biblical building contractors loved them. David used cedar when he built his palace (2 Samuel 5:11). Solomon used cedar to build the original Temple and the returned exiles used cedar again when they built the Second Temple (Ezra 3:7).

The cedars of Lebanon were so popular, they were almost all cut down but not before Ezekiel used them to show how the mighty tree gave shade and nesting to ‘every kind of bird.’

Bear this in mind when we get to Jesus’ parable of the mustard seed in Mark’s Gospel, where we will find two parables of the kingdom of God.

In the first parable, ‘The kingdom of God is *as if* someone would scatter seed on the ground.’ Our first question might be, who is the *someone*? Could be God in the Garden. Could be Jesus sowing the Word. But Jesus said, ‘the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.’ That’s not God or Jesus – they would know. The *someone* is just that, a sower who scatters his seed on the ground in a very random way, and he benefits at the harvest.

The harvest itself seems like a miracle – the sower does no tending or weeding once the seed is sown; the grain just grows in a mysterious, invisible way.

The kingdom of God, said Jesus, is like that.

Then Jesus told the parable of the mustard seed, and Mark’s original audience might have picked up on the one similarity between the great trees of Lebanon and the mustard shrubs that grew in Galilee – both provided shade and nesting for the birds of the air.

When the mustard seed sprouts and grows up, it becomes ‘the greatest of all shrubs,’ said Jesus. But it’s a seasonal shrub that will take over your garden if you let it. There’s nothing majestic about it at all. Even so, Jesus said we can compare the kingdom of God to this shrub.

So, what’s going on here? What is the kingdom of God like in this parable?

Taking both parables together, the kingdom of God is like the random sowing of seed that produces a great harvest on its own and it is also like a mustard seed – a small seed, figuratively the smallest – that becomes a shrub large enough to give shade and protect the birds of the air.

So, two parables that focus on the kingdom of God. It starts out small, grows on its own, and provides a rich harvest and protection for those who come to it. We get that. How does it tie in with Jesus? We expect him to be involved here. After all, Mark wrote that his Gospel is ‘the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God’ (Mark 1:1).

Well, back in chapter one, which is not that far away, Jesus said, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near’ (Mark 1:15). Mark's Gospel is all about the arrival of God's kingdom in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth.

Throughout the Gospel, Jesus proclaimed the nearness of God's reign through his teachings with parables. Let anyone with ears to hear listen! (Mark 4:9)

History shows us that people resist God and what God will do. Either they can't or won't let God into their lives, or they don't believe that God is involved in the world in any way. Less than 100 years ago, some people attempted to push God aside. They wanted their politics to control the hearts and minds of their nations. And they did so because a believing, faithful nation was too dangerous. To them, God's kingdom was a threat.

Jesus said, the kingdom of God has come near but it is also the promise of the future, which the tyrants of the world will never understand.

In our first reading, God was speaking directly to the exiles, who had suffered in their defeat and in whom there was no hope. And then Ezekiel came along and proclaimed that God would have the final say, and it was so. Throughout history, God is at work in the world, quietly, invisibly, kind of like a seed growing in the ground.

Jesus used parables partly to guard against unfriendly eavesdroppers but also, through parables, he could reach those who wanted more than what the world was offering. He could reach the people who truly wanted the bread of life, who hungered to know about God's way. For them, the seed was a powerful image, a literal symbol of life.

Jesus invites us to commit, to take a risk – a leap of faith, if you will – to help make a future with God be more than a hope and a promise.

God's kingdom is not a towering empire. Our congregations are not out to conquer the world. God merely asks us to have the faith to dwell in the kingdom.

God has planted a mustard seed – or, if you prefer, a cedar sprig – for us too, and one day, we will all find shade beneath its branches.

Amen.

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¹ Bernard Lang, *Kein Aufstand in Jerusalem: Die Politik des Propheten Ezechiel* (Stuttgarter Biblische Beiträge; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1978): 61.