

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church + Modesto, California
The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
July 6, AD 2003

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Ezekiel 17:22-24

²² ***"This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. ²³ On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches. ²⁴ All the trees of the field will know that I the LORD bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.***

"I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it." (NIV)

If the Church Were a Tree, What Kind of Tree Would She Be?

Brothers and sisters of our Lord,

Some of you notice something familiar about the sermon theme for today, "If the Church Were a Tree, What Kind of Tree Would She Be?" Smirks on faces reveal the familiarity. Years ago, Barbara Walters was conducting one of her now-famous celebrity interviews. During the interview, Barbara Walters posed the question to her celebrity interviewee, Katherine Hepburn: If you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be? And America wondered, What kind of a silly question is that? Years later, Barbara Walters has never been able to live that question down. In fact, it has come to epitomize the silliness of celebrity interviews ever since.

Well, I couldn't resist using that question as the sermon theme this week. At the risk of sounding silly, I chose it because, when it comes to how we view the Christian faith, it's actually not a silly question at all. And since the Bible describes the Christian church as a tree here in Ezekiel and elsewhere, we'll ask the question. If the Church Were a Tree, What Kind of Tree Would She Be? We'll ask the question, and we will listen to God's answer.

Before we begin, we should be clear on something: What do we mean when we talk about "the Church"? We use that word "church" in many different ways. "Church" is the building we're in right now. "Church" is also something on Sunday mornings and other special times; we "go to church." "Church" is this organization named St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran. We are a church. And our denomination, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod—we call that a church or church body.

When I say "the Church" in this sermon, I'm usually going to be talking about the family of God. Not a visible organization, not a local congregation, not a building, but rather the whole family of God. All people of all places of all times who believe or have believed in the one, true God. That's what we're talking about in the Creeds. Today we will confess that we believe in "one holy, Christian and apostolic Church." In other words, we believe that there is one group of people, set apart by God, given faith in Jesus Christ, built on the foundation of the Holy Bible, which was written by the apostles and prophets. The family of God, the Holy Christian Church—that's the "church" we'll be thinking about today. We could actually rephrase the theme of the sermon: "If the Family of God Were a Tree, What Kind of Tree Would She Be?"

Other "trees" look bigger and better

The Bible book of Ezekiel is a weird book. In it, the Lord tells a series of messages to Ezekiel, the prophet. These messages he commands Ezekiel to tell to the people of Judah. The Lord uses all kinds of wild word pictures and even some object lessons to make his point clear to the people. Here's one of those messages: "This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will take a shoot from the very top of

a cedar and plant it...” The Lord pictures Judah as a cedar tree. Cedar trees were the redwoods of Bible times, the Sequoias. They were the soaring, majestic trees of the forest.

That’s a fitting description for the kingdom of Judah in her heyday: soaring and majestic. (We need to know some things about this kingdom to understand this section of the Bible.) The kingdom of Judah had Jerusalem as her capital city. The boundaries of Judah had reached for hundreds of miles in every direction. David had been Judah’s greatest king. A military man, David had fought many battles, and the Lord had blessed him with victory and prosperity. King Solomon had followed David on Judah’s throne, and he was world-famous. Solomon’s wisdom, his wealth, and the grand Temple to the Lord he built in Jerusalem—these were legendary.

Sadly, the majesty of Judah didn’t last for too long. After Solomon, almost all the kings of Judah were less than faithful to the Lord. The once expansive kingdom broke in two. Her power diminished. Judah wasn’t the great redwood she once had been.

Nevertheless, Judah had a long and storied history. It had been a world power and could be a world power again. At least, that’s what some of Judah’s kings and some of her people thought.

The Lord, however, thought otherwise. Judah, by and large, had turned away from God. Instead of worshipping the Lord, many of Judah’s kings and people over the centuries worshiped false gods. They did disgusting things in their worship that would shock us. They rejected the Lord. The Lord, in turn, sent prophet after prophet to tell the people to stop what they were doing. A few listened and repented. Most did not. So the Lord used a foreign empire, the Babylonians, to conquer Judah. Israel, Judah’s neighbor to the north, had already been conquered and devastated by another empire, because Israel, too, had been unfaithful to God. At any rate, Judah was conquered. Some of the people were deported to Babylon. And the king of Judah swore to the Babylonians that they would pay them tribute money.

Are you with me so far? Judah, the home of the people God wanted to call his own, was now a slave country. If you look at the first part of Ezekiel chapter 17, the chapter we’re looking at today, you will see God picturing all of this. God pictures a tall cedar tree who gets its top plucked off and replanted. But the part that’s replanted doesn’t become a new tree. Instead it becomes a humble vine, growing low to the ground. The Lord stepped in and humbled unfaithful Judah.

And it got worse. The king of Judah, now a slave to Babylon, tried to build up his nation all by himself. He made an alliance with another foreign king, the pharaoh of Egypt. But the alliance backfired. The Babylonian emperor found out that Judah was sneaking around behind his back. He was furious. He destroyed Judah and Jerusalem and killed Judah’s king.

So what does any of this have to do with us?

In us is the same tendency that was in Judah: a desire to be great without God. Judah wanted to be a great nation. But instead of humbly asking the Lord for his blessing, the kings of Judah went their own way. They looked to themselves and then to the world around them seeking greatness, and in the process they turned their backs on the Lord. Christians collectively have to watch out for the same thing. We want to be a “big tree”. The “trees” around us are big. We see other organizations, even other religious groups, growing faster than we are. We see other people being accepted by mainstream society better than we are. Meanwhile we are tempted to think that we as the Christian Church have some weights dragging us down. For instance...

- + When much of the world says that human beings came into existence by evolving from lower life forms, when they say that the universe came into existence through a mysterious “big bang”, Christians say, “No, we believe that God created us and all that exists, and that he did it out of nothing, using only his powerful word.”
- + Christians say that one of the most momentous events in human history was the birth of a baby in the Palestinian town of Bethlehem. This baby was actually the Son of God made flesh, who had come to bring peace between God and humankind. A little baby.
- + We say that this baby grew up, went around teaching and proclaiming and gathered a band of largely uneducated followers. We say that the words he spoke are more meaningful than anything the world’s best philosophers ever said. This is especially true of what he said to people: “Repent of your sins against God, and depend on his mercy to pardon you.”
- + We say that this man, the Son of God, was betrayed by one of his students, arrested, falsely convicted, and executed on a cross. But although he could have stopped it, we say, he willingly died as atonement for all the sins the world would ever commit against God.

- + Christians say that this man came back to life after he had died. We say that he rose up into the sky and that now he lives and rules over the whole universe.
- + We claim that this man who died and rose again, Jesus, is so important that there can be no peace with God without him. Spiritual life is impossible without Jesus Christ.

That's what Christians believe, right? That's what we believe. But you know probably better than I do that many of these cornerstones of Christianity seem ridiculous to the world. Are they holding us back? Maybe we could tone down our beliefs a little bit. Maybe we could dilute them a little. Maybe we could make them more palatable to the people of America. We could tone down the talk about the needs all people have, the need for a good relationship with God, the need for removal of their guilt in the sight of God. We could say that Jesus is not as important as maybe we thought, that there are other ways apart from Jesus to get close to God. At least we could dispense with some of these old-fashioned things we do. Come on, somebody dumps water on me and I become a child of God? I eat a little bread and drink some sweet wine and I'm receiving the body and blood of Jesus? Get serious.

Tone things down. Compromise. Modernize. Accommodate. The world will love you for it! The temptation is always there for the church. We know, because as individual Christians we've been tempted to back down on our beliefs so that people will think more highly of us.

God calls us to repent of these attitudes and to believe in his way of operating. The fact remains that God started this group of people, the Christian Church. And God's way of starting it was unconventional. Look again at Ezekiel 17, verse 22: This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. A "shoot". A "tender sprig". Just a little piece broken off a big tree. The big tree represents Judah, the people who wanted to be great without God. The shoot that came from the big tree? It's Jesus, who was born as a little baby, who grew to preach and teach, who died on a cross, who rose and ascended. From this little baby grows the family of God. With the simple Gospel message God creates his church.

This leads us to part of the answer to our question: If the Church were a tree, what kind of tree would it be? One with very small and humble beginnings. Small and humble, at least, to the naked eye.

But a great reversal is coming

Did you catch this phrase when the section of 2 Corinthians was read earlier: We live by faith, not by sight. (2 Corinthians 5:7) What does that mean? It means that for Christians, the most important things are not the ones that seem most important. The things that look like the best things aren't necessarily the best. And the things that are the worst aren't necessarily the worst. The most important things and the best things are the promises that God makes to us. We don't see these things with our eyes, but they are there nevertheless.

Think again of Ezekiel 17. God has promised to take a little shoot, a tender sprig and plant it. He's talking about Jesus. Jesus was born in a humble way, he lived a humble life. Yes, he did draw some big crowds, but many of those people eventually left. Then he was crucified, died and was buried. Humble beginnings. But what happened next, after Jesus rose? Let's listen to the Lord speaking through Ezekiel: I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Can you imagine doing this? What if I found a giant Sequoia, hundreds of feet tall, and broke off a little branch, just a few inches long? What if I then took that little sprig and planted it in the ground? What chances would you say it had for becoming something big? Next to none!

But no so for the shoot that the Lord planted. As Ezekiel records it, the tender sprig would become a huge cedar. Imagine that!

We don't have to imagine that. It has really happened. Jesus Christ, who came in such a lowly way, has formed for God a people. In every age in history God has brought people to faith in his promise, the promise that one person would come into this world and change everything. We are part of that group. People from every nation, tribe, people and language are part of that group. In Ezekiel, Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches. The Church of Jesus Christ extends all over the world. Wherever the good news of Jesus is proclaimed and the sacraments of Jesus rightly

administered—for through the Word and Sacraments Jesus brings people to faith and keeps them in faith through the Holy Spirit— there you will find members of the Holy Christian Church.

The Lord adds this note: All the trees of the field will know that I the LORD bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. The great kingdoms of the world, the Babylonians, the Egyptians, and every other world power—what has happened to them? They've fallen. But the Christian Church, the family of God? It will never fall. It will never die. Now, it will look weak and sick and wounded, but it will never die. There will always be people who believe in Jesus. Our Lord promised, the gates of Hades will not overcome [my church]. (Matthew 16:18)

Other organizations may look better. They may be more popular. People who boldly defy God—they will often be the ones who make the most money or draw the biggest crowds. Christians and Christian congregations will often seem to be the most out-of-touch people on the planet. But don't be fooled. God will bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. He will dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. The Christian Church will enjoy the splendor of God. "I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it."

To wrap up, I'd like you to look at the words of the hymn we sang before the sermon ("Hark! The Church Proclaims Her Honor", *Christian Worship* 530). Look at the first stanza: "Hark! The Church proclaims her honor"—Listen up! Church of God is about to tell us why she is so great. "And her strength is only this:"—Here it comes; here's what makes the Christian Church so strong. "God has laid his choice upon her"—God picked her. Purely out of his grace, his incomprehensible love, he chose people to be his own and enjoy his goodness. "And the work she does is his"—Christians have a higher purpose than just living for themselves. They live for the one who died for them and was raised again. Christ lives in them. They love. They serve. They act as witnesses to the world, sharing the good news about Christ with all people.

If the Church were a tree, what kind of tree would she be? One with apparently small beginnings. One with a vibrant, living present. And one with an amazing, glorious future. All thanks to the grace of God. Amen.