

Tender Twigs and Strong Cedars

July 15, 2018

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Hello Artisans, I'm coming to you from the distant past (actually, just from a few weeks ago). I'm recording this on June 25 and you are watching it on July 15. And as you watch it I am in the middle of my summer vacation, so maybe I'm body surfing in the Atlantic Ocean or maybe I'm tubing on a calm lake in central Maine. Or maybe I'm just relaxing on my couch a few hundred yards over there in my house experiencing what it's like to actually rest on a Sunday morning. I'll be back with you soon. The important thing is that we get to be together here today by the miracle of this technology and I get to share with you a teaching from the Bible that I hope will be a blessing to you.

Normally I would not do it this way. Normally when I'm on vacation you get guest speakers or people from the Artisan community who are gifted in teaching the Word of God. And you're getting both of those things while I'm on vacation. I can't wait to listen to the podcast, actually. But in this case, I had a sermon that was already mostly written — one that I kind of liked, as it happened. But I ended up canceling the sermon that week. It was based on the lectionary readings for June 17, which was the week when I ditched my sermon to talk about Romans 13 in response to the way that that text had been used. It had been coming up in the news because it's been used related to immigration policy and family separation and obedience to the ruling authorities and all that kind of stuff. So I thought what I would do is record myself giving the sermon that I was going to give that day and play it for you today while I'm away. The sermon is called “Tender Twigs and Strong Cedars” and I'm going to refer to most or maybe all of the lectionary readings for June 17. But the main text that I want to focus on comes from the prophet Ezekiel, specifically, Ezekiel 17:22-24. If you have one of these red Bibles it's on page 684. I'll read it now but if you want to follow along in a Bible you can take one from the chairs there or find it in your own Bible. It's Ezekiel 17:22-24 and it says this:

“Thus says the Lord God, I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar. I will set it out, I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs. I myself will plant it on a high

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and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live. In the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind. All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the Lord have spoken it; I will accomplish it.”

Sort of a beautiful image in this passage of a replanted cedar tree, and not replanted the way we would think of replanting usually by uprooting it from one place and putting it in the ground in another place, but rather by cutting a tender shoot off the top and taking it to a high mountain. What a beautiful thought that God takes something small and vulnerable and partial and incomplete and turns it into something strong. Something that grows its own twigs and limbs, something that produces fruit and offers shelter for other small vulnerable things. I love this picture of God taking something insignificant, or seemingly insignificant, and making into something strong and powerful. One of the other readings from the lectionary for today is Jesus in His teaching the parable of the mustard seed. Jesus offers this teaching in Mark four:

“With what shall we compare the kingdom of God? It is like a mustard seed, when sown upon the ground is the smallest of all the seed on earth. Yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs and puts forth large branches so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

And once again something tiny grows into something huge which then, in turn, shelters other small things. How inspiring it is to think that even in our weakness we can be made safe and strong, that we can become shelter for others. This is the testimony of the Scriptures. The psalmist sings of this too. Hopefully you heard it at the call to worship today from Psalm 92; “The righteous shall flourish like palms and grow like cedars.” By the way, if you’ve ever seen a cedar tree from Lebanon there are quite impressive trees. They really are quite big and can certainly provide homes for lots of little birds. But the psalmist suggests that if we are righteous, if we are planted in Yahweh’s house that we “will produce fruit and will be full of sap even in old age,” the psalmist says. It's a lifetime of flourishing in God's goodness. What an image, by the way, to be full of sap. I'm not sure I want to be full of sap when I'm older but I'll just trust that it's a fitting metaphor.

And you know, in one of our other readings today Paul says this in 2 Corinthians that, “If anyone is in Christ they are a new creation. Everything old has passed away, everything has become new.” This is a different type of image for God's work but it's still poignant and still gives us the same message because we may feel that the old creation, whatever it is, is quite sub optimal. We may feel that the whole world is broken. It sure seems like it some days doesn't it? The

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whole world is in need of repair. You may feel personally that you are worthless, that you're inadequate, that you're even broken. And what the grace of Christ offers you is a total re-creation not only of yourself, not only of myself, but of the whole world as we participate in the creation act — in the work of making things right, which is what God is about. So all throughout today's lectionary readings from the prophets of Israel to the Psalms to the gospel to the parables and to the prophets, there's a feel-good material to be had and to be read. And I want to encourage you to bask in it, to soak it in, to internalize it and to allow yourself to believe that it could be true for you — that you could be the tender twig that is replanted and made into a strong cedar. The you could be full of sap in your old age, that you could be made into something new. Because you matter, each one of you. No matter who you are, no matter where you're from, no matter how much money or power you have or don't, no matter who you love, no matter what color your skin is, no matter what you've done in your life. You are God's beloved. Despite what the world may say about you, God can use you to do incredible things in the world and that includes lifting up other people who feel worthless or inadequate.

You can be saved, and not just in the in the spiritual afterlife sense of that word, but you can be saved in the here and now. The people of Israel were saved from exile after conquest. Your people can be saved from whatever exile they're going through, from whatever conquering the powers of the world have done in their life and in their community. And you can be part of that, you can make a difference. I want you to soak that in; I want you to allow yourself to believe that it's true. But these passages are not just about feeling good about ourselves. It's not just about even the salvation of an oppressed minority or the lifting up of the downtrodden among us, it's it's about a fundamental reordering of the entire world. See, Ezekiel doesn't just say that the Lord will replant the tender twig and that it will become a strong cedar. He doesn't just say that the dry tree will flourish. He also says that God will take the high tree and bring it low. He says that God will take the green tree and make it dry. The lectionary, as it so often does, omitted part of our psalm. But Psalm 92 in the part that doesn't get assigned in the lectionary also talks about the judgment of the wicked. I think sometimes we don't want to think about judgment. But if you think about the systemic evil in the world, how the systems of oppression need to be broken and judged, maybe it would be good to reclaim some of that language.

And then there's this — you know, there's something else about Jesus's parable of the mustard seed that's very poignant that we missed because we don't know understand the agricultural realities of the world in that time and place. It's not just the idea that the mustard seed is a symbol of God's kingdom because it's something small that grows into something big. Mustard was an invasive species. It tended to grow so quickly and so widely that it took over all the other plantings around it. And in the Talmud, which is a sort of a Jewish commentary on the teachings from the Old Testament from the Jewish Bible, planting mustard was actually

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forbidden because, invariably, it would it would overtake and mix with all the other plants around it, which was a violation of the Law of Moses, according to Deuteronomy. And furthermore, by providing shade to the birds that farmers would normally drive away it disrupted the normal order of things in a way that made people maybe feel kind of uncomfortable. It gives additional meaning, perhaps, to Ezekiel's idea that the cedar twig will grow into a strong tree that will house and listen to winged creatures of every kind. So not only does this parable offer hope for people who feel very small and powerless, not only does Ezekiel's prophetic vision offer hope for people who feel like just a little tiny part of something that's so big and massive that they couldn't possibly make a difference, but these teachings are also cause for concern, or at least they should be, for people who enjoy the status quo a little too much. For people who would prefer things to remain neatly where they belong, for people maybe who would prefer for other people to stay where they neatly belong.

There's phrase that I love one that was originally coined in speaking about the newspaper, but I think it applies at least as well to the Bible and especially to prophetic literature in the Bible like we've been looking at today. The phrase is this: "It should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. If you are new to the Bible and you have only preconceived notions of what it's like, you may never have heard of the Bible spoken in this way. And it is certainly true that the church as a whole has lost its prophetic edge, at least here in our country you don't hear the church at the forefront of this kind of work. But this is the consistent posture of the Holy Scriptures, it's the consistent voice of God as spoken by the prophets and embodied in the life and ministry and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

If you are marginalized and oppressed and forsaken and forgotten, God in Christ Jesus seeks you out, wants to lift you up. And if you're powerful and wealthy and comfortable and profiting off the pain of those who have less than you, and believe me this applies to me more than I wish it did, then God in Christ Jesus aims to bring you low. Because it's in losing your life and only in losing your life that you have a hope of finding it. It's in being lowered into the grave that Jesus conquered death and was lifted up into glory. And this is the path that we who call ourselves His disciples must follow. This is why the church often, when speaking of Holy Communion, uses the words of the Apostle Paul who said that, "The Lord Jesus on the night that he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he'd given thanks he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also after supper saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me, for as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.'"

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I always wondered why it said you “proclaim the Lord's death.” Wouldn't we rather proclaim his resurrection, his life? You start to think about what's happening in these prophetic passages. What's happening in the teachings of Jesus, what happened on the cross. And once you begin to understand you begin to want to embrace and reclaim the idea of death and to proclaim the death of Christ Jesus. It's in that death that we all find life. And so I invite you now to come to the Lord's table. Proclaiming not only death but also resurrection, receiving his grace in his body and his blood. Remembering that tender twigs become strong cedars even as the high are brought low. Grace and mercy be yours now and always. Amen.

[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com