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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
June 17, 2018

Scripture Lessons: 2 Corinthians 5:1-10, Mark 4:26-34
Hymns: 28; 20; 307; 309

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Ezekiel 17:22-24

²²Thus says the Lord GOD: "I will take also *one* of the highest branches of the high cedar and set *it* out. I will crop off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and will plant *it* on a high and prominent mountain. ²³On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it; and it will bring forth boughs, and bear fruit, and be a majestic cedar. Under it will dwell birds of every sort; in the shadow of its branches they will dwell. ²⁴And all the trees of the field shall know that I, the LORD, have brought down the high tree and exalted the low tree, dried up the green tree and made the dry tree flourish; I, the LORD, have spoken and have done *it*." (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

In Christ Jesus, God our Savior, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: When things look bleak ...

There are discouraging times in people's lives, in nation's lives. We all encounter difficulties along the way. Maybe someone will tell us that this too shall pass. There are times when things look so bleak that the prospect of things getting better seem very remote.

In the history of Judah the times in which the prophet Ezekiel lived were about as bleak as it gets. The Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar was a cruel tyrant and when one crossed him and was on the receiving end of his anger people suffered. The only thing that could be worse was if one fell under the wrath of God, and the judgment of God. Judah had defied God's calls to repent delivered by the prophets. Finally Jeremiah in Judah and Ezekiel already in captivity in Babylon confirmed the bad news for the rulers and the people of Judah. Jerusalem would fall. Many would die, most of the rest would be taken away captive, never to see their homeland again. The future of the mighty Davidic dynasty looked bleak. The survivors in captivity or left in Judah were at the point of despair. In one of Ezekiel's visions the Jewish people's view of their national existence was seen as a field of dry bones. The future looked very bleak indeed. Was there any hope? What of the Promises of God regarding the Messiah? Was that coming to an end too?

It was in the face of all this harsh reality that comes with sin and impenitence and judgment that Ezekiel is given a very powerful parable to share regarding the tearing down of the mighty cedar of the line of David. Yes, Jerusalem would fall. Things could still get worse.

And then, putting a twist on the same parable or picture, the Lord restores hope for the faithful.

THEME: The Lord Affirms: His Kingdom Comes!

According to the Lord's twist on this picture --

I. His Kingdom comes with lowly beginnings.

The Lord had used Nebuchadnezzar to break down the glory of Jerusalem, and bring an apparent end to the throne of David. Nebuchadnezzar was the worldly power seen to have brought down Jerusalem and destroyed the temple, but we are reminded in the last verse of our text that it was the Lord. *"And all the trees of the field shall know that I, the LORD, have brought down the high tree and exalted the low tree, dried up the green tree and made the dry tree flourish; I, the LORD, have spoken and have done it."* (Ezekiel 17:24) The LORD brought this judgment upon Judah! The LORD had the

temple which had borne His name, torn down to the ground! The LORD had directed the course of human history so that the people of Judah were taken into captivity for seventy years. It was the LORD who had brought down the high tree of the pride of Jerusalem, and the impenitence of the Judah. Yes, the LORD had made the prosperity and the glory of Jerusalem dry up because they had turned away from the LORD to serve other gods, to chase after their own lusts. It was all according to the words of promises of God proclaimed time and again by the mouths of the prophets, and yet the people did not understand, **“I, the LORD, have spoken and have done it.”** (v. 24)

What was left looked pretty bleak. It looked as if there was no one left to serve the LORD. It looked like the kingdom of God was history, without a future. All that had been had passed away. Isn't that the way of the powers of this world. Where are the Assyrians who fell to the Babylonians? Where are the Babylonians who fell to the Medes and Persians? Where are the Persians who fell to the Greeks? Where are the Greeks who fell to the Romans? Is that all we see here with Judah's fall? Is it nothing more than the pattern of history that dynasties and then empires come and then vanish away?

If that is all we see here then what is the lesson for us Christians of 21st century America? The spiritual future of the America looks pretty bleak, and the future of the church looks pretty bleak. But thanks be to God that is not the lesson the Lord presents here. The lesson continued to reveal that the same Lord who tears down also builds up.

A remnant of Judah would be restored to their homeland. They would never again be the world power they had been in the days of David and Solomon. However, the LORD had spoken and He would fulfill all His words and promises. He had promised that the throne of David would be established as an everlasting throne over and everlasting kingdom. That word of the LORD would be fulfilled, not in a political way with an earthly kingdom, but in a spiritual way with an eternal and spiritual kingdom.

The LORD who had allowed Nebuchadnezzar to break off the top of the cedar on the heights of Jerusalem, to bring Jerusalem down

and humble the line of David so thoroughly, well the LORD also would pull a shoot from that mighty cedar, not to destroy but to plant. The opening words of our text speak of this wonder of grace.

Ezekiel 17:22-23a Thus says the Lord GOD: “I will take also *one* of the highest branches of the high cedar and set *it* out. I will crop off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and will plant *it* on a high and prominent mountain. ²³ On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it; and it will bring forth boughs, and bear fruit, and be a majestic cedar.

That branch, that young twig which the Lord cropped off of the mighty cedar that was fallen to such depths, well that young twig was the Messiah who as to come into the world. We all understand the wonder of grace that is found in the Savior’s birth, at least we think we do. In fact it is beyond our comprehension that the eternal Son, by whom all things were made would deign to become one of us, to be our brother. That is the Lord’s doing in establishing the throne of David as the everlasting kingdom He intended it to be. And so Jesus was born in Bethlehem, as it was supposed the son of a builder, and his young wife, both of whom were descended from David, but who really cared about that anymore? Joseph was a craftsman who had a son who learned His Father’s business. Ahh! Indeed. Jesus knew that He must be about His Father’s business. The Lord, He had taken that shoot from the branch of the cedar tree that was David, and the Lord planted it, and it would take hold and grow into mighty and strong cedar. **“I, the LORD, have spoken and have done it.”** (v.24) And when the Lord does what He has promised all that He promised is fulfilled! So also with this shot growing up into God’s Kingdom. Even though it may have appeared to have humble beginnings:

II. God’s Kingdom comes with unparalleled grandeur.

The Lord opens our understanding to the wonders of His grace with a picture that reveals His power to save.

Ezekiel 17:23 “On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it; and it will bring forth boughs, and bear fruit, and be a majestic cedar. Under it will dwell birds of every sort; in the shadow of its branches they will dwell.”

A tree was planted on the high mountain of Judea. While Zion upon which Jerusalem was built was not the highest of the mountains of Judah, the act of grace that took place there would exalt Zion above all other mountain peaks. The act of grace that planted the shoot that grew into that mighty cedar happened right there on Mount Zion on a little hillock called Golgotha, “the place of a skull.” There Jesus, who had carried His own cross, was crucified. There Jesus, who bore our sins in His body, paid the redeeming price for our souls. There Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “*It is finished,*” and commending His spirit into His Father’s hands, gave Himself over to death. There Jesus was buried in a rich man’s tomb. All this according to the words of the prophets, and there on the third day, Jesus rose to life again as our Lord our Savior, our King. “**I, the LORD, have spoken and have done it.**” (v. 24)

As our King He directs the course of human events for the advancement of His gospel of love and forgiveness in His blood, through faith in His merits. This gospel is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes. (Romans 1:16) This Gospel reveals the salvation which God as worked for us, for the Lord has spoken, and so it is done!

The little shoot has since grown into that mighty cedar whose branches extend to the far corners of the earth. So the Word of the Lord grows, so the Kingdom of God comes according to the Lord’s will for the salvation of sinners of every nation of every race, of every tongue, throughout the world. Right now there is an explosion of this gospel power in many nations in this world! The Word of the Lord grows! His Kingdom comes!

And so the kingdom of God comes among us also. God’s Word has been taught in its truth and purity and we have been called to faith by the powerful working of the Holy Spirit. We have been brought into the shade of this powerful cedar of the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ. Here we have the blessings of God’s love and providential care, of His love and forgiveness, of His love and preserving power brought to bear upon our hearts and minds. He keeps us in His grace unto life everlasting. We grow in this

grace as we continue in the gospel which comes to us in Word and sacrament.

And so we know the power of the Word of Lord. He plucked that tender shoot, that twig from among the mighty, the mighty which He brought low. He planted that little tender shoot in the death and resurrection of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ who is the only name under haven given among men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12) And so the tender shoot took root and grew, and grew, and still grows as more and more and also ways more desperate sinners find shelter in the branches of the mighty cedar of the kingdom of God and His Christ.

So if you are tempted to think that things are looking bleak, even if you have good cause to think that things are looking bleak, remember who it is who is in charge, it is the Lord who speaks and it is done, and He promised the gates of Hades would not prevail against His Church. Prospects for the kingdom of God are actually very bright indeed! Lord, may your kingdom come among us also.

AMEN.

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Amen. (Romans15:13)