

Ezekiel 17:22–24

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 and lofty mountain.

²³ 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.

²⁴ 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;
I will accomplish it.

2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17

So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord — ⁷for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. ¹⁰For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

...

¹⁴For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.

¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

Mark 4:26-34

He also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

³⁰He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet 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.”

³³With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Growing Season

It is growing season in Lincoln!

- I've been watching a catalpa plant on the south side of F Street, diagonally across from the church ...
 - Big leaves ...
 - Grew last year to over ten feet tall
- Look around ... do you see signs of God's kingdom around you?

Two of today's three readings touch on plant life ...

- Ezekiel talks about cedar trees
- Jesus throws down two parables involving seeds

Ezekiel ...

- Prophet of hard times ... showing the displaced Israelites how to walk by faith as displaced people ...
- Begins by pointing to the riddle of failed power politics and ensuing chaos in light of the LORD's sovereignty ...

- Then he asks the people to look forward to a time when the LORD transports a sprig of cedar to Jerusalem ...
 - The cedar tree is mentioned 75 times in the Bible
 - The Cedars of Lebanon were magnificent trees
 - Used for the paneling of King David's palace
 - Used for the paneling of King Solomon's temple
 - Emblem of modern Lebanon
 - Ezekiel envisions a mighty tree growing ...
 - Not just so "birds of a feather" can flock together ...
 - But to shelter all sorts of birds.
 - This "noble cedar" points to ...
 - The continuing mission of God's people Israel, even in exile ... and ...
 - The mission of Jesus of Nazareth

Mark's Gospel reports that Jesus spoke to the people in parables ...

- The Greek word “parable” means to ‘throw beside’
 - “Para” means beside (the paralegal works beside the lawyer)
 - Our word “ballistics” means the science of the path taken by things that are thrown
- Parables use every day things to get people thinking about deep meanings ...
- Ezekiel and other Old Testament prophets spoke in parables.
- Rabbis before and after Jesus taught by using parables.

So, Jesus spoke to the people in parables, too ...

- Interestingly, the parables remain ... the private explanations are lost!
- We might even say that “Jesus told so many parables that he became one” ...
- Or that he was God's “living parable”

Jesus spoke to the people in parables ...

- He sensed that the people were hungry for more than “the facts” ... parables respect that hunger
- The kingdom is here, but remains a mystery to be explored
- The kingdom is so great that even Jesus could only point to it by throwing down concepts like growing seeds and invasive bushes as pointers

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus uses parables to describe the Kingdom of God ...

- The “automatic soil” and
- The mustard seed

The “automatic soil”

- An anonymous sower scatters seed “on the earth”
- “All by itself” the soil produces grain
 - You can almost hear the word “automatic” in the Greek word auto-ma-TAY, can’t you?
- The sower can sleep easy because he/she trusts God
- We do not know how God’s kingdom grows ...
 - Just that it does

In the parable of the mustard seed, Jesus remixes Ezekiel's parable of the transplanted cedar sprig ...

- In place of the noble cedar, we find a garden bush on steroids ...
- (The Roman naturalist Pliny did call the mustard bush an invasive species that takes over gardens.)
- When Matthew and Luke relate this parable ... both change the bush to a tree!
 - Perhaps offended by weed association ...
 - or perhaps remembering Ezekiel.
- The good news that the parable points to is this ...
 - We do not know why growth happens ... just that it is an essential process of this wonderful universe we live in.
 - We do not know why God's kingdom grows ... only that Jesus invites us to trust that the Kingdom will bring about the well-being of all creatures!

It is growing season in Lincoln!

- We have rejoiced as the automatic soil has produced plant life ...
- Look around ... do we see signs of God's kingdom around us?