

THE NOBLE CEDAR

Ezekiel 17:22-24

Third Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The Old Testament lesson for the Third Sunday after Pentecost comes from the prophet Ezekiel, chapter 17, verses 22 through 24. In this Old Testament scripture, we see the way the LORD works. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Ezekiel 17, beginning at verse 22, we read in Jesus' name.

²² Thus says the Lord GOD: "I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. ²³ On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest. ²⁴ And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

The LORD brings low, and the LORD lifts high. This is how God works. Those who are high and exalted and proud and even righteous, he brings low. And those who are low and poor and humble and sinful, he lifts up. This is how God works. This is what he does.

Here in Ezekiel he says, "I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish" (17:24). We see this all throughout Scripture. The LORD brings low, and the LORD lifts up.

I'll give you some other passages that teach this, because this is a consistent pattern throughout the Bible. In Deuteronomy 32:39 God says, "I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal, and there is none that can deliver out of my hand." In Proverbs 3:34 it says, "Toward the scornful he is scornful, but to the humble he gives favor." James and 1 Peter both reference this verse from Proverbs, saying, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5). James also says, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you" (4:10). And Peter goes on to say, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you" (1 Pet. 5:6).

Jesus teaches this too, perhaps more than anyone. In Luke 7 Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are poor ... Blessed are you who are hungry ... Blessed are you who weep now ... Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man!" (7:20-23). Then he turns it around and says, "Woe to you who are rich ... Woe to you who are full now ... Woe to you who laugh now ... Woe to you, when all people speak well of you" (7:24-26). And in Matthew 19 he says, "Many who are first will be last, and the last first" (19:30). Then he tells a parable of a master of a vineyard who hired workers all day long, and at the end of the day, he pays the workers who only worked for one

hour first, and he gives them the same amount as those who started in the morning (Matt. 20:1-16). He caps it by saying again, **“So the last will be first, and the first last”** (Matt. 20:16).

Jesus raised up those who were brought low. He made paralytics to walk. He made the blind to see. He opened the ears of the deaf. He touched lepers and cleansed them. He restored crippled hands. He even raised the dead. He forgave sins. He ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners. But he was often harsh to the righteous Pharisees and scribes. When they called him out on it, he said, **“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance”** (Luke 5:31-32). The LORD brings low, and the LORD lifts up. This is how God works, and we see it all over the Bible.

In Ezekiel it has to do with the kingdoms of the world and the kingdom of the Christ. Here Ezekiel prophesies that the LORD would plant a tree in Israel that would rise above all others. And this tree is Christ.

Whenever we're in the Old Testament, I think it's helpful to figure out where we are in history. In The New Testament, everything takes place within about seventy years. And most of the events take place within just three years, so the cultural landscape is easier to figure out. But the Old Testament covers several thousand years. And it doesn't really zero in on just one specific time period. From Abraham to Malachi, who was the last of the prophets, is a little over 1600 years. And most of that history is covered in relatively equal depth. And a lot changes during that time period. It goes from Abraham, who was a nomad, wandering around the Middle East, to his descendants, several hundred years after him, being slaves in Egypt, to them escaping Egypt and coming back to the land of Canaan, through the period of the judges, and through the period of the kings. And during the period of the kings, the people of Israel were divided into two kingdoms, so both of those kingdoms have their own histories. One of those kingdoms, the northern kingdom, was taken into exile and never returned. The southern kingdom had their own exile, but it only lasted for seventy years. So there is a lot of history in the Old Testament, and it's hard to just open our Bibles and start reading. It helps to know where we are in the history of the Old Testament.

So a few months ago I made a little cheat sheet for the Old Testament. You're not really cheating if you use it. I printed some more and put them on the table in the narthex. So pick one up and use it as a bookmark. It'll help you remember where you are in the Old Testament. I kept it simple, so it doesn't have a complete chronology on it, but it will help you figure out what time period you're reading about.

Ezekiel prophesied around 590 BC. So this was during the period of the kings. More specifically, he's about four hundred years after King David. The kingdom had already been divided. David's grandson was responsible for that blunder, and that happened around 931 BC. A few hundred years later, in 722 BC, the northern kingdom, which went by the name Israel, fell to the Assyrians. And they never returned. They were scattered around the world and disappeared among the nations. The southern kingdom, which went by the name Judah, had some righteous kings, so God spared them from the threat of Assyria. But they eventually ran out of good kings, and the kings kept getting worse and worse, so God raised up Babylon to discipline them. And that's where Ezekiel fits in.

Ezekiel was a prophet of the LORD, but he didn't actually prophecy in Judah, because he was an exile in Babylon. He and Jeremiah were contemporaries. They prophesied at the same time, and they warned of the same things. The difference was that Ezekiel was in Babylon, and Jeremiah was in Jerusalem.

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Most of Ezekiel's ministry takes place early in the Babylonian captivity, before the destruction of Jerusalem. In 597 BC King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took King Jehoiachin as a prisoner and made his relative, Zedekiah, king in his place. So Nebuchadnezzar allowed Judah to have a king, so long as he was obedient to Nebuchadnezzar and paid tribute to him. And both Ezekiel and Jeremiah commanded that King Zedekiah should be obedient to Babylon. Babylon was God's instrument of discipline, so they should accept that discipline from the LORD. But Zedekiah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. He looked to Egypt for help. Egypt was the other big world power, and Judah was geographically stuck between them. They had Babylon to the east and Egypt to the southwest. King Zedekiah began looking to Egypt for help. So in 587 BC Nebuchadnezzar came down hard on Judah and destroyed Jerusalem, including the temple.

That's what the first part of Ezekiel 17 is about. We just read verses 22-24. But in the first part of the chapter, Ezekiel tells a riddle about two eagles and a vine. Then he gives us the meaning. The first eagle, which is Babylon, broke off the top of a tree. That's King Jehoiachin. And he planted a vine instead. That's King Zedekiah. But eventually that vine turned toward a different eagle, which is Egypt. So Ezekiel asks, *What will the first eagle do?* Answer: *He's going to destroy it.* And that's exactly what happened.

And Ezekiel reveals that this is actually the LORD's doing. By rebelling against Babylon, King Zedekiah was really rebelling against the LORD. God had raised up Babylon in order to discipline Judah. By looking to Egypt for help, King Zedekiah was really trying to escape the LORD's discipline.

But in the midst of this hostile and complicated political environment, the LORD tells another parable. And that's what we read in Ezekiel 17:22-24. The LORD says that he will break off a young and tender twig from the top of a cedar tree and plant it on the mountain height of Israel. And this tiny, tender twig will grow into a great tree. Ezekiel calls it "a noble cedar." So picture this in your mind: a mountain. And there's not really anything on this mountain. But a cedar tree begins to grow. And it grows and grows and grows and grows until the tree overshadows the mountain. You should have a disproportional picture in your mind. And all the other trees in the world see this tree as the real deal. And all the birds from all over the world come and make their nests in this tree.

This tree is the Kingdom of the Christ. Jesus is probably referring to this passage in the gospel lesson when he speaks of the mustard seed (Mark 4:30-32). The only difference is that Jesus uses a mustard seed instead of a cedar tree, but the idea is the same. The tree grows and grows, larger than all the plants around it, and the birds come and make their nests in the shade of this tree. Jesus spoke this parable concerning the Kingdom of God.

So Ezekiel's parable and Jesus' parable are essentially the same, and they have the same meaning. The tree is Jesus. He is planted like a mustard seed or a young and tender twig. So Jesus comes into the world in humility. He is born in poverty to the Virgin Mary. He even dies and is buried. But he rises, and he emerges as the tallest and noblest tree. He rises above all the kingdoms of the world. And the birds represent the nations, that is, the Gentiles. Every kind of bird comes and makes its nest in the tree. That is, people from every nation under heaven find their rest in Jesus.

The salvation of the Gentiles is not just a New Testament idea. It is taught in the Old Testament as well. It has always been the plan of God to give salvation to all peoples. There are false teachers who teach, either explicitly or implicitly, that Israel is God's special nation, and he loves them more than other people. So Christians are sort of a second class. Some even say that Jews will be saved apart from faith in Jesus Christ. This is false. No one is saved apart from faith

in Jesus Christ. Even the saints in the Old Testament were saved through faith in Jesus Christ. They did not know him yet as Jesus of Nazareth, but they had the promise of the Christ, and they believed that promise. These false teachers don't recognize that all the promises of God find their fulfillment in Jesus (2 Cor. 1:20).

This promise of "a noble cedar" is a prophecy of Jesus. And it's not a promise still off in the future. It's not the sort of thing where we're waiting for him to come and restore the glory Israel had during the reign of David. Jesus has ascended to the right hand of the Father, and he rules now over all of heaven and earth. To set up an earthly throne would be a demotion. It is true now that Jesus' kingdom far surpasses every other kingdom, and it is true now that people from every nation under heaven find rest in Jesus' kingdom. The only thing left is for this kingdom to be revealed for all people to see. That will happen on the Last Day, when Jesus raises the dead and judges all men. Then all will see that Jesus is the true king of heaven and earth. So this prophecy from Ezekiel is one that has already come to pass in Jesus Christ.

In Ezekiel's day, this prophecy was a comfort to the exiles of Judah. The LORD brings low, and the LORD lifts up. King Nebuchadnezzar was on top of the world. He was the most powerful man on earth. But the LORD brought him low (Dan. 4:28). The LORD brings every kingdom of the world down to dust. And he establishes the kingdom of Jesus Christ as an eternal kingdom. It will never be brought low. It rises above all the kingdoms of this world, and it will endure beyond this world, because it is not of this world (John 18:36). The LORD brings low, and the LORD lifts up.

There's something about this that appeals to us. I don't know about you, but I enjoy watching proud people fail. I like it when the cocky quarterback throws an interception. Or to put it in a more positive light, we all like a good underdog story. If I'm watching a game, and I have no prior investment in either team, I always pull for the underdog. There's something natural about this. But it rarely works out. The underdog usually loses, and the cocky quarterback usually throws a touchdown, because there's a reason he has such confidence. In this world, the high usually stay high, and the low usually stay low. We might even try to knock the proud down a few notches, but it usually doesn't work. This is the LORD's work. He does it. The LORD brings low, and the LORD lifts up.

This reminds us that it is not our work. It is not our job to humiliate the proud. We want to humiliate the proud for our own selfish reasons, so that we can take their place. This is not right. It is the LORD's work. And we can rest in that. We can rest knowing that justice will come. At the proper time, it will come, and there is absolutely nothing that can stop it, because this is the LORD's work.

And this work is good. It is even good for us. We experience this work of God in our own lives through Law and Gospel. Through the Law God exposes to us our own sinfulness. God lays us low. He exposes our sinful pride. He exposes our selfishness. He exposes our foolishness. He exposes our lust and greed and envy. Through his commandments, he brings us low. Consider these commandments and what they do to your spirit: You shall have no other gods. You shall not misuse the LORD's Name. Remember the Sabbath; gladly hear and learn God's Word. Honor your parents. Do not murder or cause any bodily harm. Do not commit adultery; do not even lust. Do not steal. Do not deceive. Do not covet. The commandments bring us low. If they don't, we're not paying proper attention. Those who present themselves as righteous are exalting themselves. They are not submitting to God's work.

Faith submits to this work of God. Faith trusts that even when God's work is painful, it is good. So we trust that God brings us low for our own benefit. "Humble yourselves before the

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Lord, and he will exalt you” (James 4:10). He brings us low so that he might exalt us in Christ. This is how God works.

God even brings himself low. This is an odd thing, because he does not need to be brought low. He is the only one who can be proud without it being sinful. For God to be proud is just. But he brings himself low for our good. He brings himself down to our level in order to raise us up with him. This is the work of Jesus. This is the picture of the noble cedar. This is the tender twig the LORD takes from the lofty top of the cedar, and he plants it. This is Jesus coming down to us in humility. He is born under the law. He comes down to us in our depravity and weakness. He even takes it as his own and descends even farther than we do. He suffers the full condemnation of God for all our sin. This is lower than we have to go. Jesus humbled himself for us to spare us from that condemnation. He was brought low, so that he might lift us up with him when the Father exalted him to the highest place.

We cannot lift ourselves up. And we should not try. It is the LORD who brings low and the LORD who lifts high. He humbles the proud. He sends the rich away empty. Those who appear righteous are called sinners. While the poor and weak and humble and sinful are lifted high in Jesus Christ. The LORD brings low. The LORD lifts high. And by this work we are saved. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.