

Sermon June 14, 2015 Mark 4:26-34 Ezekiel 17:22-24
“God’s Certainty in an Uncertain World”

We just heard three poetic verses from Ezekiel 17, basically assuring God’s people that God was and is in charge, and that God can prune and graft and plant and bring forth huge boughs and fruit, shelter for every kind of bird... So that all the trees of the field shall know, God says, that I am the Lord... And God ends with the promise: I have spoken this; I shall accomplish it.

Ezekiel was a prophet/priest who spoke God’s Word to the people of Judah during their defeat and exile in Babylon. The people had been uprooted from their land and “planted” in the land of the Babylonians; here the prophet assures them that GOD is the one who ultimately does the pruning and planting of his people. God is in charge. God will bring down the haughty and lift up the lowly; God can dry up a tree that thinks it has life, and restore a tree that seems all dried up... God can and will do this!!

Not a bad message for us today, actually. Our society is filled with folks trying to “be the tallest tree,” trying to get ahead of other folks. Driving a car is one example; aggressively pushing the driver ahead by sitting just about on the bumper; rushing to pass whenever there is a passing lane; no courtesy, no sense of humanity - just competition: GET OUT OF MY WAY!!

The politicians hoping to run in the 2016 presidential election are at the point where they must make themselves seem like “tall trees” with a lot of leadership ability, vision for our country, and fetching personalities. They have an entirely different approach, as they try to win our interest and trust, from the way King David was chosen by God in last week’s lesson from 1 Samuel. Today’s lesson from Ezekiel would remind us that, regardless the rhetoric and even landslide victories, and even though we’re way over here in America and it’s 2500 years since Ezekiel proclaimed God’s message to the uncertain people of his day, God is still in charge. God is the Rock higher than we are, the Master of all agriculture, the Discerner of every human heart, and the Giver of our salvation through Jesus Christ.

This week I attended the New York Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, of which we are members. Each year clergy and laity from some 500 churches come together to do business, to hear our bishop, and to be inspired in our work as God's people. We hear good preaching and sing lively hymns of faith even as we deal with dismal statistics and discouraging budget matters. We struggled with the same question puzzling other Christian denominations: "Why are we not growing? "Why is attendance down? Why do the younger generations seek answers elsewhere?"

Our Bishop told us that the New York Annual Conference has lost 10 percent of our membership in the last few years, which is quite disturbing but not terribly surprising. People don’t go to church the way they used to. We didn’t hear very many “success” stories, though there were some.

Of course God is to be praised when there is observable growth. But what about when we see little or no growth? One year at Conference an Evangelism leader stood up and outlined a new

program, and stated that each congregation would be asked to send a "core" group of 40 members to attend the program. One woman stood up and said what several others felt: "You've left my church out in the cold by these numbers. A large church might be able to send forty to a meeting, but what about those like mine, where a Sunday morning is good if we see 25? Doesn't the Methodist church care about the little folks?"

All of this points to one question: If we find ourselves so small and insignificant, if we cannot discern growth among us, can we still believe that God is still working God's purposes out in, among, and through us? Can God bring change where it seems impossible? Can God work through old people, tired people, discouraged pastors, small and limited programs?

Jesus' parables of the seeds growing speak a message of hope. Seeds look so small, insignificant. The farmer planted the seed, but he couldn't cause it to grow; he didn't even know how it grew. The farmer did what he could do, but he could do no more than what he could do. God through God's nature-plan took care of the rest. The tiny, insignificant elements of life can, in God's economy, be transformed into the very things that enable life and provide shelter and hope.

So it is with the kingdom of God. God's kingdom is something for which we hope in the future, but it is also God's work right now to transform every moment into something never lost. The little things become big things, like a huge bush out of a tiny seed. In God's kingdom, the lowly and overlooked will be invited to understand their own greatness in God's eyes. In God's kingdom, the hungry are fed, enemies pray for each other, and Christians dare to serve instead of demanding to be served. In God's kingdom, those who feel as though they suffocate with grief will some day be filled with joy as they share new understanding and life with those they had thought they'd lost.

An acquaintance of mine lost her cousin in a hiking accident a few weeks ago. She is devastated, for it was sudden and seems so final. She told me, "I talked with him on the phone the night before he died, and he was fine and excited about an upcoming seminar he was going to lead. We joked as we always did; now he's gone. I need to see him again. We were close and shared a lot of the same kind of struggles. I cannot believe that he's gone forever."

As I listened, I realized that my faith does not say or believe that this woman's cousin is gone forever. He died and his body isn't here any more, but God's in charge, and Jesus told that criminal on the cross next to him, "*Today* you will be in paradise." (Luke 23:43) And he told his disciples, "I will be with you forever, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28) As it was not over for Jesus, it was not over for his followers, and it is not over for us when we die. God is STILL in charge! The kingdom of God, mostly unnoticed by most of us most of the time, RULES even so!!

Seed grows unseen – so it is most of the time with God's kingdom. We live looking forward to a great "someday" when everything will make a new kind of sense, where the power and presence of God's work will be absolutely unmistakable and undeniable, but we are called by Jesus to be part of the kingdom right now, right here on earth.. Until the final kingdom comes, we must dwell in the hope of the small changes, the often private transformations we find in our own hearts and

families. Until then, we are challenged to walk around and read our newspapers watching for tiny growths, noticing opportunities to help something grow in someone else. Reminds me of a definition I heard of a saint: "A saint is somebody who helps make it possible for another person to believe in God." We're invited to walk through an unpromising, uncertain world believing that by God's work we can serve as saints. Our choices, our words, our tiny moments of reaching out, can make a difference!

You may have heard the story of how during World War II what a few people did in very restricted circumstances made a huge difference in the lives of others: In his book, *The Fall of Fortresses*, Elmer Bendiner describes a bombing run over the German city of Kassel during the Second World War: "Our B-17 (The Tondelayo) was barraged by flak from Nazi anti-aircraft guns. That was not unusual, but on this particular occasion our gas tanks were hit. Later, as I reflected on the miracle of a twenty-millimeter shell piercing the fuel tank without touching off an explosion, our pilot revealed to me that it was not that simple.

On the morning following the raid, pilot Bohn had gone down to ask our crew chief for that shell as a souvenir of unbelievable luck. The crew chief told Bohn that they had found not just one shell, but ELEVEN shells in the gas tanks - eleven unexploded shells where only one would have been sufficient to blast us out of the sky. It was as if the sea had been parted for us. Even after all those years, so awesome an event leaves me shaken, especially after I heard the rest of the story from Bohn.

He learned that the shells had been sent to the armorers to be defused. The armorers told him that intelligence had picked them up. They could not say why at the time, but Bohn eventually got the answer.

Apparently when the armorers opened each of those shells, they found no explosive charge. They were clean as a whistle and just as harmless. One was not empty. It contained a carefully rolled piece of paper with this message, scrawled in Czech ... It read: "This is all we can do for you now." Those forced to manufacture the shells had managed to leave out the explosive charges. (reference taken from *Word and Witness*) "This is all we can do for you now." "This" saved many human lives. (pause)

We know for sure that our world is full of uncertainties. A surprise attack on a police station in Texas, escaped murderers in New York, huge data breaches on the news every week, and who knows what will happen today? In the midst of everything that succeeds in keeping us up at night, we are given a certainty: We may not see the kingdom of God or hear people acknowledging it, but it is here, for God is quietly at work to bring forth God's intentions for this world, even our salvation and forever healing. The kingdom of God, where nothing is lost, where God's plantings will come to fruition and where everybody - *all* the trees of the field - will know that God is the Lord. May we dare to let God be our certainty, the Rock that higher than we are. Amen.