

...Lovely as a Tree

See if you can provide the last word of this quotation: “I think that I shall never see / A poem lovely as a...” Tree, that’s right. I suspect most folks would remember that one from high school English, even if it wasn’t the title of my sermon this morning. Alfred Joyce Kilmer doesn’t get a lot of love from the critics for this simple poem, completed not long before he was killed by a sniper in World War I, but it’s been a staple for English teachers for several generations since. Does anybody remember the rest? “A tree whose hungry mouth is prest / Against the earth’s sweet flowing breast; / A tree that looks at God all day, / And lifts her leafy arms to pray; / A tree that may in Summer wear / A nest of robins in her hair; / Upon whose bosom snow has lain; / Who intimately lives with rain. / Poems are made by fools like me, / But only God can make a tree.” And, God did make trees. Lots of them, which is a very good thing indeed because trees are important.

You heard me discuss with the children a few minutes ago why trees are important and they came up with some great reasons that have to do with recreation and the place of trees in our food chain and in our environment. Trees are also important for human beings symbolically, which is alluded to in the story I read them and the significance of the cross to point us toward God. In the time before Christianity came to Northern Europe, the forefathers of all the Scandinavians here this morning would have talked about Yggdrasil, the World Tree, which of late has been a part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the movies about Thor as well as in Neil Gaiman’s book, American Gods, and the TV series made from it. In popular American literature, we have had “The Giving Tree,” by Shel Silverstein, and Boo Radley’s oak tree in To Kill a Mockingbird. There have been some pretty sinister trees in British literature for Young Audiences in the last few decades: the Whomping Willow in the Harry Potter series, Old Man Willow in The Lord of the Rings, and one that I bet not many here would know, the “demon tree,” Green Noah, of the “Green Knowe” series by Lucy Boston. Of course, having mentioned The Lord of the Rings, I would be remiss if I did not mention those “shepherds of the trees,” the Ents.

Nor is there is there a shortage of trees in our spiritual literature, the Bible. Everyone remembers the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree of Life from the Genesis account of the Garden of Eden but even Genesis 2:9, in which they are introduced, reminds us that there is much more to trees than just those two: “Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food...” I love the fact that the reasons given for God making trees put the aesthetic before the practical. The beauty of trees is also used as a metaphor for the beauty of the lovers in the Song of Songs. In 2:3, the young woman speaks: “As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.” In 7:7-8, it is the young man speaking: “You are stately as a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters. I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its branches. Oh, may your breasts be like clusters of the vine, and the scent of your breath like apples...” Pretty steamy stuff.

To put the emphasis back on the spiritual, there’s Psalm 1:3, speaking of those who are faithful to God’s law: “They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.” That should sound familiar to all those who remember the old folk spiritual, “We Shall Not be Moved.” The book of Revelation picks up on imagery from the prophets when it describes the New Jerusalem: “On

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either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” The tree imagery in the Bible even includes God describing Godself as a tree in Hosea 14:8: “I am like an evergreen cypress; your faithfulness comes from me.” We heard that one the first Sunday of May.

So, it’s hardly surprising that Ezekiel taps into this rich imagery for a word of hope to the exiles in Babylon. In the time remaining, I’d like to set the stage for these words from Ezekiel about a very special tree, think about the context in which this message arose, and then trace how it spoke to Jews after the Exile, to the Early Church, and how it may speak to us today. A word of hope is always welcome in difficult times and the universal power of the image of trees lends itself well to a message of hope. Remember, when Martin Luther was asked what he would do if he knew he would die tomorrow, he replied, “I would plant a tree today.”

Current scholarly consensus is that Ezekiel, a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem, was part of the elite group exiled to Babylon upon the capture of the city and King Jehoiakim’s death. The Babylonians sent his heir, Jehoiachin, to Babylon as well and appointed his uncle, Zedekiah, as their puppet. In the first part of chapter 17, Ezekiel tells a veiled version of what happened next. Although Zedekiah, represented by the vine, had been “planted” by the first bird, Babylon, he then sought alliance with a second bird, here representing Egypt. The result was his death and the complete destruction of the Kingdom of Judah, with the majority of the inhabitants subject to the second exile. Clearly Zedekiah’s infidelity to the Babylonians was disastrous for the people of Judah. To Ezekiel, Zedekiah’s actions were not just ill-advised, they were sinful. It was Babylonian practice at that time to have oaths of loyalty taken to their king by foreign dignitaries sworn in the name of the divinity worshipped by the foreign dignitary. Zedekiah had sworn loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar in the name of Yahweh. By foreswearing himself, he not only broke faith with the Babylonian king but with God as well.

But after telling the story of Zedekiah’s actions in a parable and explaining it, Ezekiel returns to the language of the parable to predict a hopeful future for the exiles. God, he says, “will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar” and will plant it “(on) the mountain height of Israel.” The sprig from the top of the tree is a descendent of the deposed king, Jehoiachin. The mountain height of Israel is Zion, the mountain upon which Jerusalem was built. The Davidic kingdom is to be restored and all the birds will come home to roost. The exiles will go home. Furthermore, says Ezekiel, all the trees of the field, all kingdoms of the world, will recognize the supremacy of Yahweh. At that time, God’s restorative justice will prevail: “I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.” The usurpers and conquerors will suffer and those who have suffered will be made whole. Ezekiel’s use of tree language here may remind us of a much more well-known passage from an older prophet, Isaiah: “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.”

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These Messianic prophecies concerning the House of David were not forgotten by the Jews. Many believed that they were coming true just two generations later when the Babylonians were defeated by the Persians and, according to Persian policy under Cyrus the Great, a party of Jews were sent back to Judea to restore Jerusalem and its Temple. As their governor, under Persian authority, Cyrus sent a young man named Zerubbabel, the grandson of Zedekiah. It was and is a matter of some interest that Zerubbabel's name can be translated, "shoot of Babylon." Was he the cedar shoot predicted by Ezekiel and the shoot from the stump of Jesse predicted by Isaiah? Sadly, the inhabitants of Judah didn't get much chance to find out. The Biblical record is unclear but by reading between the lines in the book of Nehemiah, Zerubbabel seems to have disappeared abruptly, replaced as governor by the non-Davidic Nehemiah. The hope for a restoration of the House of David would have to wait.

The Early Church believed that the hope for a Davidic king had been fulfilled, at least spiritually, in Jesus of Nazareth. The man they understood to be the promised Messiah is specifically referred to as the Son of David by Paul, in the Gospels according to Mark, Matthew, and John, and finally in Revelation. The Gospel according to Luke and the Gospel according to Matthew have genealogies of Jesus in their early chapters and they differ quite a bit. But both of them trace Jesus' lineage through the unfortunate Zerubbabel.

You may have picked up on some other connections to Jesus in this passage as well. Like Ezekiel, Jesus compared God's work on earth to a plant which, when grown, becomes so large that "the birds of the sky can lodge under its shadow." Of course, while Ezekiel starts with a shoot from a tree, Jesus begins with a mustard seed, quite the absurd and subversive beginning. And, speaking of subversive, listen again to God's promise for the future in Ezekiel: "I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish." Does that remind you, by chance, of Mary, Jesus' mother? "(God) has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. (God) has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; (God) has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." Again and again in the Bible, we find God's promise that those who have preyed on the weakness of others will see what they have taken away, while those who have suffered will be given their rightful share. Both the prophets of the Old Testament and the Good News preached by Jesus recognize the just and healing work of God.

So, what of the message for us from Ezekiel? I don't think any of us would welcome a monarchy in the United States, even one headed by a descendent of King David. But I do think it's fair to say that we would happily vote for women and men who not only claimed to be adherents of the Jesus Way but actually behaved as if they were walking his path. Indeed, as I mentioned last week, we should be willing to embrace leaders who display good will to all no matter what religious path they espouse. I would rather vote for a faithful Muslim who actively practiced the charity called for in the five pillars of Islam than an avowed Christian who made their money by taking advantage of the poor, the sick, and the weak. When there are candidates for elected office who truly demonstrate that they love their neighbor, protect those weaker than they are, and seek true justice for all, I will vote for those candidates regardless of party or creed.

And although it comes mostly earlier in the chapter than our passage this morning, I hope we will all remember the warning that Ezekiel had for dishonest leaders. Remember the story of

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Zedekiah? He was installed as king in Judah by the Babylonians and swore an oath in the name of Yahweh that he would be a faithful vassal of Nebuchadnezzar. Then he rebelled, seeking aid from Pharaoh, and brought destruction upon himself, his family, and his kingdom. I, for one, have had quite enough of state and national leaders who hold up one standard when their party is out of power and another when they are in. Or who promise one thing on the campaign trail, only to act against those promises once elected. I'm not talking now about those who broker deals of political compromise in order to move the debate one step closer to justice or those who find that their minds have been honestly changed in the face of newly understood facts. The give and take of politics may be hard to watch but if it's honest it can be a part of what Dr. King called the slowly bending arc of justice. The problem is, we live in an era of political expediency, when last week's promises are worth less than last week's fish. And all too often, as in the case of Zedekiah, this expediency is covered up by the name of God. But God is not mocked.

What God calls for, both in Ezekiel's time and in ours, is for leaders and ordinary people who will participate in bringing the reign of God, the Beloved Community, to fruition in our own time and place. God has told us, my friends, what is good: to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. We are called, like Jesus, to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. We are called to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, to clothe those in rags, to visit the sick and the prisoners, and to welcome the immigrants. We know that this is God's will, our leaders know it is God's will, and our nation will pay the price if we do not do God's will.

But let us also remember that our God is merciful and that through the grace of God, we always have another chance to do what is right. God's mercies, the Book of Lamentations says, are new every morning. Jesus comes to our hearts every day, we are resurrected every day, every morning is Easter morning. As we remember the death of Jesus in our monthly ritual, we also celebrate his resurrection and our own. If we are willing to open ourselves to God's love then we can truly sing, "Now the green blade rises... Love is come again like wheat arising green." Let us arise and sing and give thanks. Amen.