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“So Every Kind Will Live”

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11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Ezekiel 17:22-24; Ps 92:1-4, 12-15; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17; Mark 4:26-34

I don't think I've ever noticed this fable of the cedar sprig, have you,
 nestled in the midst of Ezekiel's dreamscape of visions and oracles?

It's a beautiful little sucker of down-to-earth realism, sprouting amidst
 Ezekiel's psychedelic visions of gargoylish creatures,
 burning coals and spinning wheels.

It's a hardy tale of hope taking root, against all odds,
 amidst dire pronouncements of divine judgment against Israel and Judah
 because of their idolatrous ways,
 and against the other nations, too, who have contributed to their apostasy.

Like a seedling that sprouts from a sidewalk crack in a run-down, crime-ridden,
 gone-to-hell-in-a-hand basket neighborhood,

 this cedar sprig sprouts from Ezekiel's imagination
 amidst the theological trauma of exile

 as a sign that Yahweh God, the Master Gardener,
 is not finished with his landscaping yet,
 that the best is yet to come; just wait and see.

I think it's interesting that our children here in Godly Play call Ordinary Time,
 “God's Great Growing Season,” which is why green is its color.

This fable of Ezekiel's comes to us in God's Great Growing Season,
 as a lesson to us, perhaps, that God, the Master Gardener,
 is still working on us,

as the psalmist says, "planting us in the house of the Lord,
so that we will flourish in the courts of our God,
continuing to bear fruit into our old age,
and always staying fresh and green." (Psalm 92:13–14, paraphrased)

But before I deal with Ezekiel's fable, I want to share a little fable of my own.

Mine is a tale of two trees, two sprigs, two shoots, two sprouts.

Last year, in the spring, I decided to "go green" and give my husband two trees
for his birthday.

One was a more expensive tree, a Japanese maple, which I knew would take
some extra TLC for it to take root and flourish in our yard.

The other was a cheap little willow sapling, which I thought we could plant
just about anywhere since our lot lies fairly close to
Huckleberry Springs, and the ground in our yard is constantly
damp and mushy.

We read the instructions for the Japanese maple point by point,
dug the hole twice as deep and wide as the root-ball,
planted it exactly as recommended in a choice spot
right in the middle of our front yard,
mulched it generously, and watered it regularly.

And we took the willow sapling and planted it in the floodplain near the woods,
between two forks of the creek which regularly
washes out during thunderstorms or flash floods.

We did nothing special to the willow sprig: no pouring over instructions,
no water, no mulch, no TLC; we just stuck it in the ground.

Spring and summer passed, and both held their own in the grueling North Carolina heat.
Fall came, and the willow's leaves turned yellow and fell to the ground,
leaving its branches bent and bare.

The Japanese maple also lost all its leaves and many of its branches, too, we discovered,
leaving it looking somewhat like a little Venus de Milo!

We doubted that it would make it through the winter.

Come spring, the willow sprouted new leaves and grew about 3 feet taller,
overnight, it seemed, with no effort from us whatsoever!

The Japanese maple also spouted leaves on its lower branches,
but the top of the tree had died out and had to be pruned back,
and the lower branches are now showing signs of blight.

Both trees were transplanted: one into the best location and soil, where it gets
constant coddling and attention;

the other into bottomland, between two creek forks,
a place most at risk for flooding and failure.

The one most favorably situated flags while the one most marginally situated thrives.
Isn't this what Ezekiel's fable is about?

The amateur gardener in me says, "Go figure!"

The Master Gardener in God says, "I myself will take a shoot

from the very top of a cedar and plant it... it will produce branches and bear fruit
and become a splendid cedar! Birds of every kind will nest in it;
they will find shelter in the shade of its branches."

Why, because Yahweh God, the Master Gardener, has always been a transplanting God,
constantly uprooting his most delicate people and transplanting them into places
of great risk, yet insuring that, by grace, they flourish, against all odds,
not for their own benefit, but for the benefit of others—
"that birds of every kind will nest and find shelter in their branches."

Yahweh God plants this sapling of hope in the hostile environment of exile;

Jesus plants his similar seed of hope in early words to an occupied nation
and promises a kingdom tree of exponential growth.

Abram and Sarai, the progenitors of the nation of Israel, you might recall,
were themselves plucked from their homeland of Haran

and transplanted by the Master Gardener into the land of Canaan,
a land flowing with the milk and honey of the Nile and Euphrates rivers,
but a land of great risk, also overflowing with Kenites,
Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites,

Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites, etc.

The chosen seed of Israel's race were promised

that they would be blessed in this transplanting, not for their own benefit,
but that *all peoples on earth might be blessed through them.*

(Genesis 12:3)

Israel's primal narrative, the one that Old Testament scholar Gerhard Von Rad notes as
key to Israel's identity says this:

*My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt
with a few people and lived there and became a great nation,
powerful and numerous.*

But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labor.

*Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice
and saw our misery, toll and oppression.*

*So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm,
with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders.*

*He brought us to this place and gave us this land,
a land flowing with milk and honey. (Deuteronomy 26:5–9)*

Yahweh God, the Master Gardener, transplanted his people first

in the hostile environment of Egypt, so they might grow to be a great nation,
powerful and numerous, but also so they might grow to be totally reliant upon the Lord.

And then when they began to suffer injustice, and they cried out to the Lord,

God plucked them up and transplanted them once more into Canaan,
that land flowing with milk and honey, in order to fulfill the
commission of God to Abraham and Sarah,
that all peoples of the earth might be blessed through them.

Desmond Tutu, in his book, *God Has A Dream*, says this:

"If God is transfiguring the world... why does God need our help?

The answer is quite simple: we are the agents of transformation

that God uses to transfigure the world.

In the Bible, when God wanted the children of Israel to be freed from bondage in Egypt,

He could have done it on his own, but he wanted a human partner.
We often forget that the patriarchs and matriarchs were flesh and blood humans,
but the bible reminds us of this repeatedly.

These people, with all their flaws, were able to be God's heroic partners."

(Tutu, *God Has A Dream*, p. 15)

"Our God is a God who knows. Our God is a God who sees. Our God is a God who hears.
Our God is a God who comes down to deliver," Tutu notes.

"But the way that God delivers us, is by using us as His partners,
by calling on Moses, and on you and me," he says. (Tutu, p. 16)

We had two interesting visitors at church last week before Sunday school.

Two Iranian men came and asked me to sign a petition to Senator Kay Hagan,
advocating for the rights of Iranian refugees forced out of Iran over into Iraq,
who are being persecuted there as well.

It hardly seems fair, does it, that they are forced from their homeland to take
refuge in Iraq, and then persecuted there also.

They are like the wandering Arameans, the precursors to Israel.

It's the third time that I've signed such a petition for these Iranian gentlemen.

They thanked me profusely and said that every time we pray for peace here,
we help their cause; we nudge goodness forward an inch, and evil backwards an inch,
and we participate in a global leaning towards human rights for all.

I felt like they were angels – like the visitors to Abram and Sarai at Mamre –
who had come to encourage us, the church, to keep doing what we are doing
because the universe is starting to shift, whether we notice it or not.

Tutu thinks that we are all meant to be contemplatives, like Ezekiel,

to hear the voice of God in our lives

and to answer God's call to be partners in God's transfiguration of the world.

"This calling, this encounter with God,

is always to send us into the midst of suffering," Tutu says.

"When I've read the book of the prophet Ezekiel," Tutu continues, "it has often struck me

how the prophet starts by describing that extraordinary vision
of the glory of God and then he is overwhelmed.

The prophet falls prostrate. But God raises him to his feet
because He wants to send him to the recalcitrant house of Israel.

He receives the Word or is imbued with the Spirit.

(And) the Spirit is given, the divine encountered, *for the sake of others!*

This seems to be the almost universal rhythm..." (Tutu, p. 109)

... the Spirit fitting us to be God's presence, healing, restoring, forgiving,
reconciling, admonishing, and comforting the world.

"It is given to goad [us] into action,

to prepare [us] for the stern business of loving God and loving neighbor,
not in a nebulous fashion, but in flesh and blood terms,
love incarnated in the harsh reality that forms the ordinary life setting
of so many of God's children." Tutu concludes. (Tutu, p. 111)

Our God is a transplanting God, constantly uprooting his most delicate people
and transplanting them into places of highest risk, yet insuring that by grace,
they will flourish, against all odds, not for their own benefit,
but for the benefit of others –
"that birds of every kind will nest and find shelter in the shade of our branches."

Last week we said our farewells to Candice Provey,

who came to FPC as one of Cherrie Henry's campus ministry protégés,
interested in following up on God's claim upon her life.

She nested first with us at FPC, planting herself in the house of the Lord,

flourishing in the courts of our God, as the psalmist says (Psalm 92:12–15).

And then she went on to earn a Master's of Divinity degree from Duke

and to serve a church in New York City for a year.

But Candice and her new husband, Ren, missed Durham,

and they returned here last year to rebuild their nest, to find jobs,

to become active in the life of this church and this community again.

But God was still at work in their lives, and when Candice was offered a position as Associate Chaplain at Yale University, I have to tell you, she winced. She met with Cherrie and me several times to talk about this new claim that God was making on her life.

"I'm thirty," she said. "We're thinking about starting a family. We love Durham. We have good friends here who are beginning to have children, and we wanted to raise our children together.

We just left the north to come back here. Why would I want to subject us again to those dreary winters in New Haven?"

Without betraying her confidence, I want you to know that Candice really struggled with this calling.

She was unsure about allowing herself, Ren, and their future family to be transplanted by God at this point in their lives.

And frankly, the last time we talked, I wasn't certain that she would do "the Abraham thing," as we call it, and step out to take the position at Yale.

But two days later, she called to say that they had decided to go, to spring forth.

Candice and Ren are allowing God, the Master Gardener, to transplant them, and I am confident

that the larger world, birds of every kind, will be blessed and benefited by their decision.

But it is risky, and it is costly, and there are no guarantees beyond the fact that the God who has called them is the God who also goes with them; the God who springs forth with them is the God who also will hunker down with them in the coldest of cold.

Or as Tutu says, "The God who believes in us is the God who relies on us to help make this world all that God has dreamed of it being." (Tutu, p. 18)

Friends, today begins a month of mission for the members of FPC.

The church is offering opportunities to allow God to transplant us into places of great need in our community.

It is God's Great Growing Season, Ordinary Time,

and God is calling us, as ordinary people, to be God's partners in making
this world all that God has dreamed of it being.

Our hope is that each one of us will consider ourselves one of God's tender sprigs
and allow God, the Master Gardener, to transplant us for a week,

for a day, for a few hours, into the kitchen of Durham's Urban Ministry,
or the playroom of Genesis Home, or the classroom of FPC's Day School,

or the shell of a Habitat House on Taylor Street,

or the floodplain of Ellerbee Creek, or in the Community Garden of St. Philip's,

or in an inner-city neighborhood with Durham Summer Service Week,

or at Camp New Hope for Vacation Church School,

not for our own good, but that the low trees might grow tall,

and that all the peoples of the earth might be blessed through us,

and every kind might live the life that God dreams for each of us.

Today we will dedicate ourselves to this month of service,

strengthened by the Master Gardener, our transplanting God,

who has transplanted his own Son, Jesus Christ,

a shoot from the stump of Jesse, David's righteous branch,

into our world, to deliver it, to grow it, to transfigure it, to transform it,

to heal it, and to love it into its intended fullness,

until kingdom comes, providing sheltering shade for all of God's creatures. Amen.