

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
July 25, 2021

Rooted

Ezekiel 17:22-24

During the past year and a half, we've experienced a lot of uprootedness. We were uprooted from our daily routines. We were uprooted from our jobs, or at least where and how we do our jobs. We were uprooted from our schools. We were uprooted from our places of worship. We were uprooted from our settled networks of family and friends, at least from an in-person standpoint. Virtually every aspect of daily life where we had felt settled got disrupted.

During this summer, we've been able to settle back into some degree of normality, especially now that vaccines are widely available. But we're still far from the sense of rootedness that we knew before COVID-19 arrived. Maybe we're still in the early stages of trying to re-root ourselves, hoping to reclaim some of the structure, patterns, and rhythms that help give us a sense of stability. Or maybe, to use another agricultural image, we feel like we've been transplanted into a different kind of reality, a new normal, where we're learning how to flourish again.

In today's Scripture passage, the Lord does some planting of his own. Our text is the culmination of a chapter that begins with a riddle. A great eagle swoops in, breaks off a branch from the top of a cedar tree, soars to a distant land of merchants, and transplants the cedar shoot in a city that has rich soil and plentiful water. It sets down roots and flourishes. But then this branch grows into a vine and yearns to be transplanted again by another eagle. This vine ends up withering.

Ezekiel then explains this riddle or parable. The first eagle refers to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, who deported the Jewish people, taking them into exile. The second eagle refers to Egypt and its leader Pharaoh, with whom Zedekiah, the king of the Jewish people, tried to make an alliance and rebel against Babylon. The revolt was unsuccessful, and Nebuchadnezzar carried out judgment on Zedekiah. He eventually destroyed the city of Jerusalem and leveled the temple, imagining that he had ended the Jewish people's hope of deliverance.

But the Jewish people, and their faith in the Lord, persevered. They didn't surrender their confidence that a messianic figure would descend from the line of David. In the midst of political and social turmoil, with the holy city reduced to rubble and the Davidic royal line in shambles, Ezekiel proclaimed God's soaring promise of deliverance and restoration. The riddle may have been explained, but the story isn't over. There's another cedar transplant coming, which brings us back to our text here at the end of chapter 17.

The Lord himself will take another clipping from that mighty tree and plant it in a safe place on the high mountain of Zion. God will make good on his promise and give his people a Davidic ruler who will govern with righteousness and faithfulness. Granted, this kingdom may have an unimpressive beginning, just a twig, but it will grow mightily into a great cedar. Its branches will expand and become fruitful. All kinds of birds will nest in it. All the other nearby trees will marvel at this tree and the God who planted it. Great results will come from small and unimpressive beginnings.

Note how this pattern is present in both of today's Scripture readings. In our earlier text from Mark, Jesus uses a parable to describe how a tiny mustard seed, when planted, "grows and becomes the greatest of all garden plants" (4:32). So both of today's parables have to do with how something great emerges from a very humble start. Both Ezekiel and Jesus draw upon the realities of plant life in order to bolster hope in the reign of God. In other words, God's saving purposes will eventually come to fruition. Present circumstances may not look promising, but the promises of God will prevail. Don't be deceived by the size of the sprig or the seed. What matters most is the Lord's power. He's the one who will bring forth redemption and restoration beyond all imagining.

Bob Seiple, who once served as president of World Vision, described how his father, at the age of 75, planted a number of very small fruit trees. According to Seiple,

"What an optimist," I said to him, somewhat mockingly. Dad passed away a few years ago, and now when I return to the old homestead, I have an option. I can go to the grassy cemetery on top of the hill and brood over his grave, or I can eat the fruit of his trees and reflect on a man who knew a great deal about hope.¹

Several years ago, Debby and I planted an eastern redbud tree in our front yard. Every April, it would burst forth with rosy pink flowers. Heart-shaped leaves that started out as reddish-purple would turn darker green as summer approached and then yellow in the fall. But over the past couple of years, the tree started to look pretty feeble. It stopped blooming. Its branches looked shriveled and lifeless. We were ready to give it up for dead. In fact, I was prepared to pull out my chainsaw and go to work. But in recent months, leaves have reemerged. Limbs are now lined with green. We have a birdhouse hanging from one of the limbs, welcoming any winged creatures that want to set up residence. What looked like the end has, by the life-giving power of God, become a new opportunity for flourishing and abundance.

In Ezekiel's parable, the tree that God will plant on the mountain "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" (v. 23). This is more than just a tree. It's a place of life. Too often, we humans see trees as basically a resource, available for our use and exploitation. Granted, there are sometimes legitimate reasons for removing them. But when we look at trees and only see something "in the way" of human progress, then we're overlooking the fact that trees are part of a larger ecosystem. They scrub pollutants from the air. They help prevent soil erosion. They sequester carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

A tree can be a world unto itself. It's a place of refuge. It's a habitat for animals. It's a means of shelter. It's a source of food. It's a provider of shade. It's a host for other plants. In other words, a tree is a place of life, a space for flourishing. Trees not only grow, they enable other things to grow. They create an environment in which God's handiwork can take a multitude of forms.

National Public Radio once did a piece summarizing research into the life of trees. According to the report:

Once trees reach a certain height, they do stop getting taller. So many foresters figured that tree growth—and girth—also slowed with age. "What we found was the exact opposite," says Nate Stephenson, a forest ecologist. "Tree growth rate increases continuously as trees get bigger and bigger," Stephenson says.

Stephenson got together with 37 scientists from 16 nations to answer the question on a global scale. They examined nearly 700,000 trees that have been the subject of long-term studies. Here's their conclusion: While trees did stop getting taller, they continued to get wider—packing on more and more mass the older they got. And we're not talking about the tree-equivalent of an aging crowd with beer guts—old trees are more like active, healthy bodybuilders.

"It's as if, on your favorite sports team, you find out the star players are a bunch of 90-year-olds," Stephenson says. "They're the most active. They're the ones scoring the most points. That's an important thing to know."²

So the next time you stop and look up at a tree, remember that you're not necessarily looking at something that has reached its peak, but something that's constantly working on its fitness.

And all that height and strength begins when a sprig, or a tiny seed, starts to put down roots. Science writer Hope Jahren says,

No risk is more terrifying than that taken by the first root. A lucky root will eventually find water, but its first job is to anchor ... Once the first root is extended, the plant will never again enjoy any hope of relocating to a place less cold, less dry, less dangerous. Indeed, it will face frost, drought, and greedy jaws without any possibility of flight.

Jahren calls this process of taking root a big "gamble." But if the seed of that tree takes root, it can go down twelve, thirty, or forty meters. She says that if the root takes root, then the plant can become all but indestructible: "Tear apart everything above ground—everything—and most plants can still grow rebelliously back from just one intact root. More than once. More than twice."³

Being rooted makes all the difference. Today's text from Ezekiel begins this way: "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it" (v. 22). And ends this way: "I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it" (v. 24). What the Lord promised, the Lord has done through Jesus Christ. The sprig, the seed, has been planted. The roots of salvation have gone down deep into the ground. God's kingdom, though often hidden and mysterious to us, will not be thwarted. Our hope isn't in vain. The reign of our Lord will come to full fruition.

One of the signs of God's faithfulness to his promise is this community of believers. Like birds that finds shelter in a tree, we've found a home in this congregation, among the people of God. Here in relationship with God and each other, we experience the refuge, the rest, the shade, and the nourishment that we need. Knowing Christ, and being connected to his people, gives our lives a rootedness that nothing else can provide. This means that for us, the community of God's people is a place of life. It's where we learn what it means to truly flourish. It's where we grow, build up our strength, and bear fruit for God.

As we look back over all the uprootedness of the past year and a half, maybe we can see this as a time when God has been present and at work, humbling us and calling us back to our only solid source of hope. All the ways that we've put down roots in our lives, thinking we'll never be shaken, actually have been shaken, and this is now the time to re-root ourselves in what God has done and will do through Jesus Christ. "I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it." Glory be to God.

¹ Bob Seiple, *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2006) 119-120.

² Richard Harris, "An Old Tree Doesn't Get Taller, but Bulks Up Like a Bodybuilder," *NPR* (January 16, 2014).

³ Hope Jahren, *Lab Girl* (New York: Knopf, 2016) 45-46.