

June 24, 2012
Pentecost 4

"The Lord Will Grow His Kingdom"

EZEKIEL 17:22-24

T*his is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. ²³ On the mountain heights of Israel I will 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. ²⁴ All the trees of the forest will know that I the LORD bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. "I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it."*

Picture in your mind a beautiful cedar tree similar to the majestic redwoods we have in Northern California. The Lord our God takes a small shoot from the top of the cedar tree and plants it on the mountain heights of Israel and it becomes a mighty tree where the birds of the air can find refuge and shelter in its branches. With this picture the Lord is telling us that he will grow his kingdom. This kingdom of love will spread into the whole world. People will find shelter in the love that our God has for them through Jesus his Son.

More than anything else people need to know about a place and a shelter and a kingdom where God loves them and cares about them. We live in a world where people are often not very kind and loving to each other. This past week we were exposed to a video clip of children on a school bus mercilessly tormenting a 68 year woman who was riding the school bus to monitor and supervise the children. Someone used their cell phone to record thirteen year old boys tormenting this woman and bringing tears to her eyes. If you have seen this video clip you wonder to yourself how people could be so evil and so mean. A group formed to raise \$5000 dollars to send this woman on a vacation because they felt so sorry for what she had to go through with these kids. Within only few days \$500,000 came in because compassionate human beings cannot stand to see other human beings be so unloving and so mean and so nasty. The only explanation for such evil behavior in children or adults or the first born child of Adam and Eve are the words of Jeremiah, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"

In striking contrast to man's inhumanity to man, we have God's perfect love seen in his desire to send his Son to suffer for our sins and bring us into the kingdom of his love. In our gospel Jesus picture this kingdom of perfect love as a tiny mustard seed that grows into a large bush where birds can find a place to nest. In these words from Ezekiel the Lord pictures the glory of his kingdom as a tiny shoot that grows into a mighty tree that provides shelter for birds of every kind. As we prepare to plant the seed of God's Word into the lives of children through our Star Bible Camp, we are convinced that the Lord will cause the seed to grow. Children will find refuge in his kingdom of love even though they live in a world that may be cruel and mean to them in a variety of different ways.

The small twig

The Lord draws our attention to a small twig that he plucks from the top of a cedar tree to help us see that what may seem small at first is actually part of something very large that will affect the lives of people all over the world. "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it."

It makes no sense to our human way of thinking. The Lord does not say he is taking part of a grape vine and planting it into the ground and then watching it become a huge vine. He is plants the sprig of a cedar tree. You may do this with a grape vine but not a cedar tree. Several years ago Norm Larson gave me a sprig from a large Concord grape vine growing in his neighbor's yard in Arroyo Grande. I put it into a pot and it started to grow. Then we forgot to water it and it almost died. Eventually the fragile little plant was put into the ground. I managed to step on it and broke off the little plant, but somehow it survived and today from that humble little twig we have a grape vine growing that has lots of grapes this year. The Lord is not planting a grape vine. He says he is going to plant a sprig, a cedar sprig from the majestic cedars of Lebanon and plant it on the mountain heights of Israel. Anyone with even a limited knowledge of horticulture will tell you that there is no way a sprig of the cedar will sprout and grow in the arid low mountains of the land of Israel. But then we remember that God's ways are not our ways are they?

For an example of something small and seemingly unimportant to our way of thinking, reflect on the priest serving in the temple in Jerusalem. He steps forward to receive a lamb from a family that has come up to Jerusalem to worship. The children have been watching that lamb grow and they have taken care of it as they traveled to Jerusalem. "Daddy, do we have to give the lamb to the priest?" The priest holds up the lamb and with a knife he kills the lamb. The children watch as the blood pours forth. To the rest of the world, what happened in Jerusalem with animal sacrifices seemed no different than other heathen religions where people offered sacrifices to their gods to appease their anger. With these seemly small and insignificant sacrifices the Lord God was picturing the great sacrifice that Jesus would give on the cross for our sin. What happened in the temple on Mount Zion was part of something huge that would someday fill the world. It was God's way of picturing for us how he would save the world.

It may seem like a small, tiny twig, when you take the time in your life to be alone with the Lord in his Word. Through the words of this book, this holy Bible, you are drawn into the kingdom of God. It may seem like a mustard seed as Jesus said, but it will grow in your life and take a hold of your life and you will see things about God's love for you that will take your breath away. Jesus said "My words are spirit and they are life." To the world the Bible may seem like a nice book that helps you live a better life. Some might say, "If only those thirteen year old boys on that bus had read more of the Bible they may not be so mean to that poor lady." The Bible is so much more than a book of better living like *Aesop's Fables*. This book brings you Jesus. "These are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you might have life in his name."

In this lowly book, this tiny little sprig, you discover that you cannot be saved by your own righteousness because everything you do falls short of God's glory. This book, this tiny sprig, is the only place in the world you can discover that you are saved entirely by Christ's righteousness and what he has done for you. As Paul says in Philipians, "That I

might be found in him, not have a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ." In the Bible I discover the truth about myself. In my daily life I see people mistreat others. Through the Bible I begin to see that I have had moments when I have been no different. In the Bible I see Jesus mistreated for my sins, even nailed to a cross for my sins.

This cross of Jesus seems like foolishness to those who don't believe. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, God chose the weak things to of the world to shame the strong." God chose a tiny sprig to be the source of salvation. Isaiah says of Jesus, "He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him."

We see the majestic tree

Look at what happens to that tiny sprig from the top of the cedar. It is planted in the land of Palestine. It grows into a mighty tree where birds from all over find refuge in its branches. "On the mountain heights of Israel I will 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. All the trees of the field will know that I the Lord bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. 'I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it.'"

The Hebrew for the birds from all over can be more literally translated as birds of every wing. See the crows and the peacocks and the doves and the sea gulls and the eagles and robins and the swallows. They have all come together to find refuge in this majestic tree that has branches and bears fruit.

They find shelter in the branches. The storms can blow and howl and the birds are safe in the branches of this large tree. The Lord wants people everywhere to come into the kingdom of his love and to join with Psalmist David in saying, "God is our Refuge and Strength an every present help in time of trouble."

Life can be cruel and frustrating. Ecclesiastes begins, "Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." You read the paper or watch the news and frustration sets in. You go to work and find frustration as people jockey to promote themselves and step on others in the process. Life is filled with frustration as we strive with God's help to live up to what we are in Christ. Jesus described this as a huge cross that we carry for him that includes the difficulty of denying ourselves. More than once we find ourselves praying "God be merciful to me a sinner." Then we listen to Jesus call to us, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

We come to Jesus and find shelter in his kingdom. Our king has come to us. The King of kings and Lord of lords came to us as a humble child in Bethlehem. Rather than waiting for us to come and serve him and show that we are worthy, he comes to us. He bows down to us and he says, "Let me take your sin and go to the cross and pay for everything you have done wrong, so I can make part of my kingdom of love." Our king cries from the cross, "It is finished." Our king rises from the dead. Our king shows us the nail prints in

his hands as forensic evidence that all has been forgiven. Our king says to the weary and exhausted, "Come into the shelter of my love."

The kids who bullied that lady on the bus felt sorry and apologized for what they had done. They saw themselves on the video clip and confessed to how awful they were. The woman has said that she forgives them for what they had done wrong. What God wants for all people is that the kingdom of his love might grow in their lives and they might believe in the forgiveness that only Jesus can give. Even a dying thief turned to Jesus and found shelter in Jesus kingdom. And so we pray, "Thy kingdom come." Amen.