

The Kingdom By Seeds

Ezekiel 17: 22-24 Mark 4: 26-34

Archaeologists found some seeds in the ruins of Masada where Jewish holdouts in the Roman War in the year 73 committed suicide after a multi-year siege by the Romans. These were seeds from a date palm. One could imagine that someone was eating these dates while under siege by the Romans, came upon the seeds in their eating, spat them out, and there they were roughly 2000 years later for archaeologists to discover.

That discovery was made in the 1970s and the seeds were filed away. Thirty years after their discovery, the seeds were rediscovered in the archives and there arose a thought. These date palm seeds were from a tree that is now extinct but which proliferated in Judea in ancient times, forming lush forests and plantations on hillsides from Galilee to the Dead Sea, and they were known for having medicinal uses in those days. Here Sarah Sallon enters the picture, a specialist in medicinal plants at the Natural Medicine Research Center in Jerusalem.

She takes on the job of trying to grow these seeds 2000 years later into date palms. It's a highly speculative venture, not simply because of the age of the seeds, but in order to get a tree to bear fruit, a date that she could examine for its medicinal potential, she recognizes a few hurdles. One is that it is only the female date palm that produces fruit. The second is that it takes time for the female date palm to produce any fruit. In fact, it's likely to take 30 years for a date palm to bear fruit. If you figure that these seeds have been waiting to do something for 2000 years, maybe another 30 years is rather inconsequential in the big picture.

It sounds easy at first: plant seeds, wait, then it grows up and produces fruit. But it depends on what you want to grow, and where and when you want to grow it. One thing it always requires is time, sometimes a little, sometimes a lot. There is a difference between growing an onion plant like Ray did. He accidentally left an onion out too long so that it started growing on its own. Then he planted it. Now, just a few weeks later, he has quite an admirable plant that's budding flowers. That wasn't hard at all.

As magnificent as his onion plant has become, it would be quite another matter to grow a giant sequoia. That takes centuries.

This week's scriptures talk about something sacred being planted. What grows out of something sacred? We had the answer last week. What is sacred is meant to be a blessing, a gift from God, that in some way (or several ways) reflects God's Kingdom.

In the Ezekiel passage, all of chapter 17 is about planting. Our passage has the closing verses, the conclusion of an extended allegory. It begins with an eagle – the symbol of the army of an empire – swooping in and snatching the topmost shoot of a cedar, the crown – and carries it away. There is some other planting that happens that produces a low spreading vine, etc, etc.

This is about the Babylonian invasion of Israel and Judah around 599 BCE. The Babylonian emperor set up a puppet king, Zedekiah. Around 587 BCE, Zedekiah makes a bold move to make an alliance with Egypt against his Babylonian overseers. It doesn't go well.

It results in another eagle – another Babylonian emperor's army – swooping in, and bringing Zedekiah back to Babylon. Through Zedekiah's exiled monarchy and the general exiling of the best of Judea into Babylon bondage, the seeds are planted in the east, and they prosper, the low vine that extends its shoots.

What we have is Ezekiel's political opinion that Zedekiah was a fool for seeking the aid of the Egyptian army, and paid dearly with the destruction of Jerusalem and the exiling of its best people. Ezekiel says it was contrary to God's will, God having ensured that the people, albeit reduced in stature and in condition – a low vine – would prosper there having been planted in good soil and with abundant water, metaphorically speaking.

But God is not finished here. Ezekiel announces in our passage that God has plans of God's own. The eagles are not the ones in charge; they are simply doing the bidding of God. Ezekiel proclaims God's word: *Thus says the Lord God: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce branches and bear fruit, and become a splendid cedar.*

Now it's God's turn to top off a cedar, taking its crown and placing it on the mountain height of Israel, in other words, in Jerusalem. The reason for God's act is so that *it may produce branches and bear fruit, and become a splendid cedar*. As far as it being a "fruit-bearing" cedar, let's leave that alone as facet of story-telling. The intent is that it will grow, spread, and be the bearer of blessings, God-designed blessings. None of the other cedars mentioned can produce this. The pretensions of the empire to hold sway over the will of God are unraveled as God asserts God's authority to bring about God's blessing. Is this a re-establishing of the Davidic king or something else?

We have a bit more here in Ezekiel 17 to shed further light on these blessings. *Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches.* Here we have a more universal expression, that *birds of every kind* will make their nests in it. It isn't simply the resumption of the failed monarchy; it's a beginning glimpse at the belief in a Kingdom of God, a more universal concept for Judaism that we find echoed and further developed by Isaiah among others.

A final affirmation of God's ultimate authority closes the section, asserting God's ability to bring down the great and raise up the lowly, to make the prosperous impoverished, and to bless the impoverished.

You heard something a bit familiar hopefully in that passage from Ezekiel, about birds making nests in what God has grown up from a seedling, yes? It's from the parable about the mustard seed. But first, the parable of the growing seed.

And before we begin, let's establish the context. Jesus has been speaking throughout chapter 4 of Mark about the nature of the word and the Kingdom of God. He has told them, "The secret of the Kingdom of God has been given to you." The word is like the seed in the parable of the sower. That's the one where some seed falls on the path, some on rocky soil, some among the weeds, and some on good soil. On the path, the seed is taken away by evil. On the rocks, the seed sprouts quickly, but its shallow soil means that it withers upon the first sign of trouble. In the weeds, the distractions deter its growth, whether it's life's worries and insecurities, or the desire for wealth, or whatever. The seed on the good soil produces amazing, incredible results, far exceeding whatever was sown.

He then talks about the lamp on a stand – the light of the lamp showing all things in their sacred truth. He goes on to say: *With the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.* These are all ways of saying that Jesus' word is blessing, and meant to be used to bring more blessings. If you don't use those blessings for their sacred purposes, to bless others, then even what you have will be taken from you.

This is what the Kingdom of God is like, Jesus says as a lead-in to his parable of the growing seed. Like the others, this is not some pretty little fairy tale. It describes the Kingdom of God. It's our job to understand what that means, to glean some insight into what the Kingdom of God is all about.

To paraphrase, a sower sows seed on the ground. No matter what he does (or doesn't do) the seed sprouts and grows. The sower is clueless about how or why this happens; it simply happens. He isn't a complete dolt; he simply knows that that is what happens when you plant a seed under the right conditions. He doesn't even have to lift a finger, something I'm sure most farmers would argue is untrue. However, reality is flexible in parables. Jesus says: *All by itself the soil produces grain.* ("By itself" in Greek by the way is *automate*.) It isn't human effort that makes the seed bear fruit; the human actor is passive, being required only to sow the seed faithfully and then reap at the time of harvest. The blessing of growth and fruit bearing comes from God. It's God-designed that way. Jesus is telling his disciples not to sweat this. Just be witnesses and let God take care of the rest.

Now on to the parable of the mustard seed which has definite and deliberate echoes of the Ezekiel passage we just reviewed. Same kind of intro as before: 'What shall we say the Kingdom of God is like? It's like a mustard seed, a teensy, weensy little seed. Plant it and then step back and watch how this tiny seed produces a big plant.' *The birds of the air can perch in its big branches.*

So what is the Kingdom of God like? It is like the seed, the good news of Jesus, planted in a favorable place. Given time, God will grow this seed in unseen, somewhat

mysterious ways to produce great blessings that will be enjoyed by all. The results of even the tiniest seed will be a remarkable blessing for the little ones who seek peace, security, and a home, all blessings provided by God, but accomplished by those who are faithful in witness to Jesus' way and word by casting the seed.

Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of God will not come about through a violent overthrow of the existing powers. Jesus tells us that it will not come in mighty demonstrations of power as were done through Moses in his encounter with Pharaoh that produced the Exodus. Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of God will not come amid calamity and chaos in some end-of-days rapture event.

No, the Kingdom of God comes to fruition like that seed planted. Unseen, it grows, changes, and transforms in the ground. Then it appears as new plants do, a little green sprout popping out of the earth. And it keeps growing, day and night, day and night, time passing as it does. Then in its fullness, it produces fruit, and keeps producing in an amazing abundance. It is like the Kingdom that produces sacred blessings for all in abundance.

There is really only one question left. We can understand that slow process by which the Kingdom is to grow and bear for all of humanity in great blessings. But what is that seed, right? Well, Jesus told us in effect that the seed is the word of God.

So what does that mean? Is the word of God like the Bible, God's word in print? Is the word of God like Jesus, the Greek *Logos*, or Word of God? No.

Actually it's ridiculously simple. In fact, it's so ridiculously simple that many people say that it has to be more than that. And yes, there is a lot wrapped up in it, but it's so dang simple.

Jesus came to fulfill the Torah-Law and the promise of God's covenant with God's people. How did Jesus sum up the Torah-Law when he was challenged? He replied with a two-fold "love" commandment; to love God, and to love your neighbor as yourself. That's it in a really nifty nutshell; the word of God is love.

The seed of love faithfully planted can develop very quietly and unobtrusively in the heart and spirit of another, in your own heart, in the heart of a community. The blessings of love bring an abundance that are unrivaled, hands down better than what comes from obligation, from contract, from charity, or anything else. Love is the elemental power of the gospel. Love is the nuclear power of the Kingdom of God.

Love is this seed that Jesus-people plant faithfully, bringing love, grace, peace, hope, healing, compassion, and promise into the world. Love builds the Kingdom.

May we always seek to build the Kingdom as faithful followers of our Lord and Savior.