

Third Sunday after Pentecost – Year B – Proper 6 – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony 6.13.21
Ezekiel 17: 22-24, Psalm 92:1-4, 11-14, 2 Corinthians 5:6-17, Mark 4:26-34

The prophet Ezekiel was speaking the word of God to a people who were in despair. They had been uprooted from their homes and taken captive to Babylon. They were the slaves of a foreign and pagan power. God, who they thought was all powerful, the creator of the world, had seemed to abandon them. They were in misery and could see no end in sight. The words of Psalm 137 speak of their desolation. Not only had they lost their homes, their land, but they had lost their God, or so it seemed.

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
² On the willows^[a] there
we hung up our harps.
³ For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
⁴ How could we sing the LORD’s song
in a foreign land?
⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
⁶ Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,

But God had not abandoned them. In the words spoken through the prophet came a wonderful and lifegiving promise. “I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; ... I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit,...Under it every kind of bird will live;”. Mountains were the places where God was revealed to human beings. Mountains were the sacred places, the spiritual places.

God was promising this defeated and discouraged people that they would be restored. They would return to the land, to the Temple and most importantly to relationship with God. They would once again produce grow strong and bear fruit. This was a promise of hope and of grace. This was the promise of what Jesus would later call the Kingdom of God. God would bring this all about and the people would need to do nothing to “earn” the promise. The promise of hope was a promise of pure grace. God said, “I myself...I will...I the Lord has spoken.” Nowhere in this poem of promise and grace is there anything required of the people. This promise of hope and grace is a sign of God’s continuing love for the humans God has created.

All that was necessary for those in captivity in Babylon to attain the promise was to believe that God could be trusted. All that was required was that they continue to live in hope even while they could not see the future God was promising. Centuries later Paul, encouraging the Corinthians would say “...for we walk by faith, not by sight.” Walking by faith, when we cannot see the future on the horizon was the call to the Israelites, to the Corinthians and to us. Walking by faith and not by sight is not something we

human beings do easily. We like evidence, we like to understand, we like to know the outcome, we like to look before we leap.

One day, when crowds gathered around Jesus as they often did, Jesus began to describe this kingdom of God. He used the same metaphors of nature with which Ezekiel spoke of hope and promise so many centuries before. The specifics might be different, but the crowds drawn to Jesus felt despair and hopelessness just as had their ancestors before them in Babylon. Many thought God had abandoned them to the powerful Romans and to the religious authorities. Those around Jesus were the poor, the unclean, the demented, the sick, and the powerless.

Perhaps Jesus was thinking of the words of Ezekiel when he began to teach this new generation about the Kingdom of God that was available to them. It was not a kingdom that was to be understood, not a kingdom into which they could earn a place, not a kingdom that they could even envision as being real. And so, Jesus taught them by parable. The kingdom into which they were being invited was described as like seed scattered on the ground.

I have in my garage a five shelf stand that is filled with things to enhance the plants in my garden. There is plant food, and special soil, there is slug and snail bait and there are things to discourage weeds. All of these things are the ways in which I hope to encourage my garden. They are useful. But, when I plant a seed, that seed contains within it all that is necessary for germination and growth. It is a special magic that occurs out of my sight, beneath the soil. Once I plant the seed beyond a bit of judicious watering there isn't much I need do until that plant appears. In fact, too much attention can actually be a hinderance. I can worry, I can watch, I can anticipate, I can plan, but none of those things really have any impact on the germination of that seed. The kingdom of God is like that, a mystery that happens out of our sight, a mystery that is a gift to us. All we need do is live in the hope and faith that God honors God's promises.

Whenever I think of the seeds scattered or of the mustard seed of Jesus' parable, I think of a childhood experience of gardening.

My mother was a dedicated and talented gardener. She could make just about anything grow. She wanted to pass that skill along to her three children. One spring when we were all deemed old enough, my mother arranged for each of us to have a "plot" of land for our own. We each got packets of seeds to plant. The soil was turned the beds prepared and finally the weather was warm enough to plant. That morning we excitedly gathered our tools and our seeds and started out to the garden. We were anxious to begin. Mother had something she had to finish in the house before she could come out, and so she told us to wait. Now waiting was not a skill or gift any of us had. My sister, brother and I gathered around looking at that soft, black inviting earth and could hardly wait. Actually, my brother didn't. He took his spade, dug a hole about six inches deep and proceeded to dump all of the seed of every kind in the hole. He then covered it up with the soil, tamped it down, dusted off his hands and was done with gardening for the day. He was doing nothing more.

The kingdom of God is like the way my brother gardens. Why? Because, against all logic, all understanding, and all human knowledge about gardening, those seeds sprouted. They not only sprouted, they came to the surface and thrived. He had corn plants, and bean plants and carrots all mixed together and growing happily. The beans curled up the corn stalks and the carrots grew. It was a miracle to behold.

The Kingdom of God isn't always neat and tidy, not always as we might wish it to be, but the promise of God is trustworthy, and the Kingdom surrounds us without us having to do anything to make it so. It is that kingdom that Paul spoke of, in which we live by faith and not by sight. It is that kingdom to which we are invited. "Live by faith and not by sight."

