

If I am to be honest, I have to tell you that the book of the prophet Ezekiel is a book that I feel distant from. And I am not alone. The scholar David Petersen, writing an introduction in the Harper Study Bible on Ezekiel, begins with this vivid introduction:

Ezekiel and the book associated with him have puzzled readers for centuries. Ezekiel is both priest and prophet, two roles that are often viewed as incontrovertibly opposed. He speaks, falls down, acts out God's word, travels between Mesopotamia and Syro-Palestine in a visionary state, sees strange visions, and proclaims dangerous messages. Perhaps it is not surprising that according to some Jewish traditions the book was only to be read by those over thirty years of age....

Peterson nevertheless goes on to proclaim Ezekiel "one of ancient Israel's most vigorous thinkers." Ezekiel prophesied from 593 to 571. This means that he began his work before and continued it after Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar. He was part of an early group taken into captivity and sent to Babylon. Before Jerusalem fell Ezekiel's words were harsh: words of judgment predominated. After Jerusalem fell, words of consolation and restoration were more prominent.

Which brings us to Ezekiel chapter 17 and our reading this morning. It is a passage dealing with sprigs and trees. And the title for this section is *Israel exalted at last*. This morning we read:

I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out; I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it upon a high and lofty mountain; on the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bring forth boughs and bear fruit and become a noble cedar and under it will dwell all kinds of beasts; in the shade of its branches, birds of every sort will nest.

Ezekiel is dealing with a discouraged people, left with little hope, and now after a lot of passages dealing with unflinching judgment on his people, Ezekiel proclaims a cosmic

vision of restoration and hope using the image and the presence of the mighty cedar tree. YHWH says *I the LORD will bring low the high tree and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the LORD have spoken and I will do it.* This is a cosmic and Messianic vision of restoration and renewal to a broken and suffering people. And it should sound somewhat familiar. In Luke, Mary in her Magnificat proclaims: *He has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away.* Today that mighty vision comes to us in the form of a giant tree in Ezekiel and in terms of that wondrous shrub, the mustard tree from our Gospel lesson. And they both proclaim, safety, abundance, shelter, full life.

Both Jesus and Ezekiel before him bring to discouraged people a messianic vision of hope using seeds, twigs, shrubs and trees.

At a combined Trinity worship service in late April, Fr. John Floberg joined us to speak to us about water is life and the people of Standing Rock and to bless some rain barrels. Fr Floberg and I gathered the congregation after Sunday Eucharist for the blessing of the rain barrels. John took a sprig and with water drawn from a local stream the barrels were blessed and so were we as the blessed water fell upon us in abundant little drops in the midst of a simple liturgy. I mention this because of the sprig, first. John took a sprig and this morning in our first lesson YHWH takes a sprig.

But I also mention this time of blessing not only because of a sprig but because of a tree. We stood in a half circle beneath the protective shade of a mighty tamarack. Just last Wednesday evening a few of us from Trinity Mineral Point gazed upon that tree under which the blessing took place. It is a magnificent tree, with abundant branches and great height. It is a tamarack or larch tree, and we learned Wednesday evening that it might be the largest tamarack in the State of Wisconsin. It has potential record size. And it also is very healthy.

The idea of a sprig growing into a giant tree and being set upon a mountain --from a spiritual viewpoint--is indeed cosmic. And while in Mineral Point we do not

have a cedar tree on the property, we do have a tamarack; and people from both churches have seen and experienced its strength and its magnificence. Here is what I learned this week online:

Tamaracks (*Larix laricina*) are medium-sized deciduous conifers that are native to this country. They grow wild from the Atlantic all the way across to central Alaska. If you look for tamarack tree information, you may find it under other common names for this tree, like American larch, eastern larch, Alaska larch or hackmatack. Given the huge range of the tamarack, it tolerates extremely varied climatic conditions, from -30 degrees to 110 degrees Fahrenheit (34 to 43 C.). It can thrive in regions where rainfall is only 7 inches annually and also where it is 55 inches annually. That means that wherever you live in the country, growing tamarack trees may be possible.

At some point in the past in Mineral Point, well before lead mining days, in a time in which indigenous people, the Hochunk among them lived free upon this land, a seed took root, perhaps from a sprig. There was enough water and good soil and it began to grow. And now it stands as a symbol of the strength of trees -- trees like redwoods, Douglas firs, cedars. It stands as well as a symbol of shelter and safety, a protective place for nests. And so we begin this morning with the image and the idea of trees, trees like the giant tamarack -- symbols of strength and endurance and shelter. And Ezekiel is telling us, this is what G-d, YHWH can do. Online I learned: **If you are growing tamarack trees, you will find that they grow fast. Correctly planted, tamaracks are the fastest growing boreal conifers for their first 50 years. Expect your tree to live between 200 and 300 years.**

<https://www.gardeningknowhow.com/ornamental/trees/larch/tamarack-tree-information.htm>

Ezekiel's cedar and Jesus with his mustard seed and shrub provide us with the same message. Things can change. Hope can abound. God and God's Spirit can not only work upon the land but upon us, when we pray, when we turn, when we pay attention, when we build community, when we reach out. Little things can become big things when the presence of YHWH is involved.

And this is mysterious. It should be treated as a mystery, this presence of God in our lives. This is the Kingdom of God that can grow and flourish. And so Jesus begins our Gospel lesson this morning with the words: *The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the*

seed would sprout and grow he does not know how. A brief note to this passage says: *The only parable in Mark without parallel in other Gospels.* And this last phrase arrests me -- *he does not know how.* All the gardeners sitting here in our congregation this morning understand this phrase, the first glimpse of green in the garden, the first witness to emerging life, the first fragile tendril of hope thrusting itself up into the light.

There are times when one does not have to live in an occupied country like Jesus did to know that challenge of remaining hopeful, of grasping the Messianic vision that G-d is not through. There are times when one does not have to live as a displaced person in a foreign country to know the challenge of remaining hopeful.

And when that time comes, remember the sprigs, the seeds, the fragile and resilient presence of green. And remember Ezekiel and his cedars, Jesus and the mustard seed---and Wisconsin and its tamaracks.

In the name of G-d-- Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.