

June 13, 2021
The Growing Season
Ezekiel 17: 22-24
Mark 4: 26-34

A few weeks ago in April or May we prayed for the growing season and that God would provide a bountiful garden with an abundant harvest. We had plants on the communion table so we could visualize our gardens, whether they were flowers or vegetables.

Every now and then I like to do check-ins-or follow up on how things are going. Perhaps its part of my nursing background to implement, evaluate, and then readjust the implementation; perhaps it part of being a pastor, to show I care and hopefully I listened the first time.

Anyway, I am glad to report that the few vegetables that Dave and I planted are growing taller, no blossoms yet, but growing. Our flowers are recovering from the shock of being transplanted. The lilac bushes are doing well, including the rooted sprig from the Rubrakes, and the trees we planted/transplanted a few years ago continue to grow.

I understand that Kathie's strawberry patch that she worked on during the pandemic, making raised beds is now fruit bearing, that Ray had to do a pot garden this year, to give his soil a year to rejuvenate, the tree that Lynnette and family had planted in the meditation garden is not just surviving but growing, and I am getting fresh rhubarb from the Sherwoods and fresh asparagus from Sharyn. I don't know what their tricks are to the growing but something is working.

Perhaps as we read and study the lectionary passages of week proper Sunday #6 that Mary and I just read, we can begin to understand how growth occurs, what our role is and what God's role is. For you see these passages today certainly describe lush trees as home for birds, but these passages are more than stories about the Farmer's Almanac or arboreriums and Audubon societies. These passages with their allegories and their parables have much to teach us about being followers of Jesus in this time of growing division, growing violence, and growing disrespect for our neighbor, which are all apostates, anathemas, and contradictions to our triune God's teachings.

Let's focus first on the Old Testament lesson from Ezekiel, the freaky prophet that continually had visions about what creation could be in the future instead of the destruction humanity's disobedience brought about. You see, Ezekiel was a prophet during the bleak and turbulent, disturbing time when the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and exiled many back to Babylonia. In the opening 21 verses of chapter 17, Ezekiel describes Jerusalem's disobedience that resulted in the exile to Babylon through the allegory or metaphor of growth on the mountain top. In this description, eagle #1 or Babylon the current captor and

eagle #2, Egypt, the potential captor, are trying to help a vine, Israel through King Zediah grow. Needless, to say in this riddle, the growth doesn't happen. And then Ezekiel paints the picture, the glorious picture of potential new growth, in these 3 mere verses Mary read.

In this third scenario not identified as an eagle but named outright as God, Yahweh himself comes and takes a sprig from a tall cedar tree, planting it on the mountain top, close to God. Ezekiel proclaims that it will grow so huge that every kind of bird, which he states twice, every kind of winged creature has home, shade, sanctuary. Growth of twigs will take place and develop into branches, boughs, huge trees that bear fruit. From tiny branches come ancient, long living, cedar trees, like the sequoias of the Redwood Forest. What was low will become high, what was high will become low declares the Lord through Ezekiel. Sounds like the first and the last Jesus will take about as his grace transforms the kingdom. Perhaps Ezekiel's words are a prelude to that teaching.

Ezekiel in these few verses brings us a message of hope, when hope was needed in a time of exile in the 6th BC and even in the time of exile we have been and are experiencing now in the 21st century AD with the tumult of turbulent government, political upheaval, and oppression taking many shapes and forms for those who remain in the low and even middle class structure of this country.¹ Hope that is based on God's sovereignty. Hope that promotes growth when our wants align with God's desire that we can all live together under the shade of one tree.²

Jesus continues this message of hope and God's sovereignty in today's parables found in the gospel of Mark. Mark does not write of Jesus' parables much. Instead, Mark focuses on Jesus' ministry of healing, remember all of those stories in the winter of Jesus' releasing the unclean spirits from the girl, the boy, the pigs? While Matthew has 15 parables and Luke 18 parables, Mark has only 4 parables—3 in this chapter and the last in a later chapter. The parable of the sower proceeds what was read a few moments ago. Mark follows up with the parable of the sleepy gardener and the parable of the mustard also found in Matthew and Luke. We are familiar with the mustard seed. That teeny tiny seed that grows a bush not a tree this time that houses many kinds of bird with lots of branches for nest and shade. Sound familiar? Are you hearing similarities to Ezekiel 17? A vision of the kingdom of God, Jesus says where

¹David W. McCreery, "Exegetical Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 127.

²James O. Duke, "Theological Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 124.

growth results in the opportunity and space for all. A story of small beginnings resulting in great outcomes.³

In the perhaps unfamiliar parable of the sleepy gardener we hear that the gardener doesn't know how, but through his tending to time with sleeping and rising, the seeds grow and a harvest comes to fruition. The gardener cannot do anything about the growing after he plants the seeds but rely on God for it to happen.

Like the allegory Ezekiel tells for God, as one commentator points out, the parables of Jesus, don't declare God's anger or an apocalyptic ending, but suggest God's grace in the form of the kingdom of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁴ As a third lectionary reading from 2 Corinthians 5:17 states, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation, everything old has passed away, see, everything has become new."

As I read the paper both here and in PA, I read story, upon story, upon story of domestic abuse, and gun violence. At the Pgh. Children's hospital while a 6 year old child was being treated for a gunshot wound inflicted during a family party, the family was outside the hospital, 30 of them, arguing, fighting, using guns again, still. Gun violence is growing. Dave reads the paper for Warren and circles all the domestic abuse police reports. The number of circles is growing and starting to fill the page.

This is not the growth that our community, our world needs. I think this growing has to do with eagle #1 and eagle #2, destructive growth from the evils of society. Perhaps we need the growth that comes from relying on God's power and not our own power for re-creation.

Perhaps we need to plant the seeds of peace, understanding of each other, respect for each other, love for each other and then earnestly pray for peace to come in our own rising and sleeping, our own activities of daily living, our own loving. And then perhaps we need to actively count on God's sovereignty for growth to occur and for fruit to be born. This does not mean sitting back and doing nothing. This is not Pollyannish thinking or dream something and it will happen. It does mean incorporating peace and love in our daily living. As hard as that may be.

³ Judith Hoch Wray, "Exegetical Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 142.

⁴ Don Saliers, "Pastoral Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 142.

Let me leave you with this modern day parable from children's author Arnold Lobel.⁵ He writes a series of stories about the Frog and the Toad. In this particular tale, Frog gives Toad some flower seeds to plant. He promises that Toad will have a garden "quite soon," but cautions Toad that this will take some very hard work. With that in mind, Toad plants the seeds and dutifully commands them to: "Seeds start growing, now." Funny thing, they don't start growing. Toad repeats the order over and over again, with his voice getting louder and louder with each command. Frog tells Toad his seeds are not growing because they are frightened by his shouting. He counsels Toad to leave them alone and let the sun and rain do their work.

Toad however hears only that his seeds are afraid, and undertakes a series of day-by-day moves to calm his seeds and urge them to grow. He sets candles out at night since maybe they are afraid of the dark. He reads them stories, sings them songs, quotes poems to them, plays music for them, calming the seeds while calming himself. He keeps this up for quite a few days, only for Toad to fall asleep beside the planted seeds because of his own exhaustion. Upon his return, Frog finds the seedlings poking through the ground, growing. After Frog wakes up Toad, how pleased Toad is but he admits: "You, were right Frog. It was very hard work." Hard work indeed because he has nothing to do with the growing."

Growing a garden of peace and love that will displace the violence and hatred in our world is hard work as Frog told Toad and as Toad eventually realized. Let us plant the seeds for this garden of peace and love by being open to what God wants, what God desires, through conversation and meals with all of God's people under that big shade tree where there is room for all. Let us trust in God's sovereignty, God's-ever presence, God's grace and love for this peace and love to multiple as we prepare for the harvest. This is hard work but there is hope.

Alleluia and Amen.

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⁵ Arnold Lobel, *Frog and Toad Together* (New York: Harper Trophy, 1971) referenced by David Schlafer in "Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World," *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), P.87