

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
June 17, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Amalia Vagts, Preacher

First Reading: Ezekial 17:22-24; Psalm: 92:1-4, 12-15; Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:6-10 [11-13] 14-17; Gospel: Mark 4:26-34

Mercy and Peace to you through Jesus, our Liberator.

Two months ago, we had snow on the ground here in Decorah. In fact, we had so much snow on the ground that school activities were cancelled. If you had been sitting here in the sanctuary that morning and looking out, you would have seen white on the ground, brown and bare trees, and likely a gray sky.

It's a little hard to imagine today, isn't it? I thought about having us take a field trip outside to look at the backyard. It's a miracle out there. There's a reason we say, "Is this heaven? No, it's Iowa."

It's lovely to imagine that heaven or the Reign of God is like a June day in Iowa. The trees seem unbearably lush, the grass greener than green. The flowers and the strawberries, the rhubarb and the lettuce are abundant and plentiful. The seeds and leaves that were hidden beneath the earth or in the trees all winter have emerged to full bloom.

Like the world around us, today's Scriptures texts remind us of the biological heartbeat of the earth. Or as one person put it during bible study on Thursday, "This week's lessons have a lot of botany in them!"

Indeed, they do. Trees and plants and seeds and shrubs. The prophet Ezekiel speaks about the mighty and lofty cedar tree - a common image in the Old Testament to convey might, beauty, strength. Ezekiel says - Under this tree every kind of bird will live... I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree. God shelters every kind of bird. God brings the low tree high and makes the high tree low. Ours is a God of shelter. And justice. Our God is all-loving.

Today's reading from Mark tells us even more about God. Jesus asks the crowd - how can we describe the Reign of God? Jesus says the Reign of God is like a seed that is scattered and sprouts and grows - even when we don't know or understand how. That not knowing - we don't like that part, do we? In fact, it's downright irritating that the

author of Mark explains that the disciples got private lessons about what the parables mean. Don't worry - like us, the disciples still don't really ever figure it out.

But I think it's also kind of wonderful (pun intended). It is a wondrous miracle when the tulips emerge from the ground or the lilacs burst into bloom overnight. Or when an idea is planted person starts to see or understand in a new way. The Reign of God is full of mystery and wonder.

Then Jesus gives us another way to imagine the Reign of God. Jesus says the Reign of God is like a mustard seed. This image would have been surprising and maybe even humorous to the listeners. A mustard seed is tiny. It was ordinary in first century Palestine. More importantly, it was a weed - not a planted crop. The mustard plant, or shrub, grew to be quite large given the size of the seed. Large enough to provide shelter. And they grew everywhere. But they weren't grand like the lofty cedar. They were a shrub, a common weed. This image would have made people laugh.

Earlier this month, David and I traveled to Scotland with my parents, his parents, and my sister. We had a marvelous time. In light of everything we did, there is one odd and funny little story that sticks out as a favorite memory. It was a bench that I sat on with my dad and then with my mother-in-law. It was a special conversational bench that curved like an S so you face different directions but you are actually quite close. David & I had seen these in parks across the Yucatan and especially in Merida. I had loved them in Mexico, so my dad and I sat in the chair to visit. As we started talking, we heard some laughter. Naturally, we looked around. Suddenly we realized the laughter was coming from the chair - triggered by our sitting in it. Of course this caused us to laugh. And then once we started laughing, people all around did too.

The Reign of God is like a little chuckle that causes the person next to you to giggle which causes everyone around to laugh and then everyone suddenly feels better. Even things that make us laugh can help us learn. This laughably small mustard seed describes the God we follow. The Reign of God is like something seemingly insignificant that grows in abundant and uncontrolled ways and gives shelter to all. It grows wildly, not governed by rows or laws.

While it must have been comical to think of a scrubby mustard shrub in the same way as the lofty cedar Ezekiel spoke of, the result was the same. Both Ezekiel and Jesus spoke of trees that grow large enough for birds to live under them. Not certain kinds of birds. Every kind of bird. God provides shelter for all.

This is a beautiful image - and a description of the world God wants for us, a description of the Reign of God. This is the world God longs for and the world we hope for.

We have this hope because as Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians - "Christ died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for the one who died and was raised for them...So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

We are new in Christ and we are called to live in new ways. And so, living for the one who died and was raised for us, we confess and we grieve the continued injustice of racism and indifference.

As people called to love and serve God and our neighbor, we listen to the needs of the most vulnerable among us seeking justice. We confess and grieve that three years ago today a young man who was raised in an ELCA congregation walked into a bible study at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina and killed nine people because of his own racism. We confess and we grieve and we commit to ending racism.

God bring the low tree high and the high tree low.

As people called to love and serve God and our neighbor, we listen to the needs of the most vulnerable among us seeking shelter. We confess and grieve that our own government is separating parents from their children at our southern border. We commit to ending injustice.

God bring the low tree high and the high tree low.

The Reign of God is like a seed that grows in the wild. It grows to provide abundant shelter for those who seek the shade of the cedar tree, the mustard plant, the mesquite shrub.

At different times in our lives, we all need God's shelter. It may be an afternoon in June in the Iowa sunshine. Or it may be a much needed fit of laughter. Or it may be shelter from violence or racism or injustice or the hot desert sun.

We all need the shelter that comes from God in Jesus through the Spirit. And, thanks be to God, we all get it. So when we have shelter - what are we to do?

Just give thanks and kick back and enjoy the summer day? Sometimes - yes.

Sit around and laugh? Sometimes, Yes. The Reign of God is like that.

And the Reign of God is like this. Each of us, in our own way, scatters a seed on the ground, helping it sprout and grow in to something that gives shelter to all kinds, not knowing how, but trusting in the earth and the One who makes it.