

Third Sunday after Pentecost

BIRDS AND BOUGHS

Ezekiel 17:22-24

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Analysis by Jerome Burce

22 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. 23 On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind. 24 All the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the LORD have spoken; I will accomplish it.

Author's Note: This is one of many Old Testament readings that are bound to bemuse Sunday morning hearers, being plucked from a textual context that hardly any know, and addressing a historical context that is barely known too. This said, what a superb springboard it affords for the preaching of God's Law and God's Gospel to hearers today. May many preachers employ it! To get started, read all of Ezekiel 17. Then review the day's companion text, 2 Corinthians 5:6-17. Proceed no further with this present study until you've done that.

DIAGNOSIS: The Swooping Eagle

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Darting for Cover*

The big birds circle and the little ones scramble, survival on their minds. That's the standard story line in earthly affairs, also in sixth century B.C. Jerusalem, where it's "up to us" to escape the predations of the Babylonian "eagle" (vv. 3, 12). How? By nesting with that other eagle, the one in Egypt, or wherever (vv. 7, 15; cf. 2 Kings 24, Jeremiah 37:1-10).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Dissing the Defender*

A mutter overheard in Jerusalem streets, echoed daily in our own: "It's not, after all, as if there's anyone besides Egyptians or their substitutes to count on. In men we trust, because we've got to. Who else is there? Some say our help comes from the LORD (Psalm 121:2), our putative defender. If so, explain how the eagle swooped in from Babylon to carry our king and our gentry away (vv. 3-4). Our God is a clawless god. Pathetic, isn't it?"

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Lord of the Raptors*
Pathetic? says the LORD. Who do you think runs Babylon? Not Marduk, surely. And as long as you brought it up, what's more pathetic than folks who willy-nilly break their solemn promises, not just the ones they made to my minion Nebuchadnezzar (or whoever), but worse by far, the ones they made to me (vv. 13, 19)? Standing tall, are you, or finagling for a way to do that? Watch the Eagle take you down. The LORD your fearsome God, that is. "I bring low" (v. 24), and none other. Depend on it.

PROGNOSIS: The Sheltering Cedar

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *King of Trees*

Yes, and the LORD bringing low also makes high (v. 24). Not that

the prophet can start to guess at how he'll ultimately do this; how the "sprig" to be planted will be broken off the "lofty cedar" who is the LORD God himself (v. 22); how the "mountain height" on which it's planted will be a skull-shaped hill just outside Jerusalem's walls (v. 23); or how, on the third day, the "noble cedar" will erupt from the earth for the sole purpose of providing life-giving cover and shelter for "every kind of bird" (v. 23), by no means excluding dead and scattered birds (v. 21) to whom the LORD's spirited and resurrecting forgiveness will be proffered with extravagance for Jesus' sake (cf. 37:11-14).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Praising the Protector*

With that proffering comes someone new to count on. In The Man we trust, as some start saying (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17), and saying it they're also reappraising that Eagle of eagles, the LORD their God. Gone are the complaints about underused or missing talons. They're riveted instead on the sight of wounded hands where hidden claws have been. "How well the LORD has helped us," they tell each other (cf. 2 Cor. 5:13-15). And when lesser eagles start swooping they say this too: "What's to fear?"

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Calling All Birds*
With that they scramble. No, not to survive, but to lose themselves in an avian rescue mission, so to speak. All those other birds out there, all in dire need of shelter, yet with nesting room aplenty on the branches of Christ the Cedar (v. 23). Reason enough for a faithful trip to Egypt (or wherever), not to spite the LORD but to do him honor.