

Third Sunday after Pentecost

TREE OF LIFE

Ezekiel 17:22-24

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Analysis by Martin Lohrmann

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.

Note: This passage provides a conclusion to an allegory that runs through this chapter. The allegory is about Jerusalem's relationships to Babylon and Egypt around the time of the Babylon, with King Jehoiachin the "top of the cedar" that was carried into exile and King Zedekiah the transplanted "seed" that perished by trusting in Egypt. In addition to reading all of Ezekiel 17, readers may want to revisit 2 Kings 24-25 for more background information about the Babylonian Captivity.

DIAGNOSIS: Shallow Soil and Withering Plants

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Shallow Soil*

The people of Jerusalem had options: they could join with Egypt to resist Babylon or submit to Babylon as a vassal. The prophet Jeremiah had endorsed the latter, seeing it as a sign of humility and acceptance of God's judgment. Not listening to Jeremiah, however, stubborn kings had thought they could prevent ruin by making their own clever deals with Pharaoh. In our day, it remains easy to believe that we can make things right in church and world if only we had clever enough political, social, religious or evangelical strategies. As a result, we fight with each other in the shallow soil over whose clever plans should win, without regard for what's actually happening in human hearts and lives.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Toppled Trees*

The deeper problem with our shallow self-righteous struggles is that we ignore the reality of human sin and need: we ignore sin by assuming we know how to save ourselves; we ignore human need, because we put our clever plans ahead of the actual needs of our neighbors. This was the pride that Jeremiah condemned in his day. It is the pride that Ezekiel confronts in chapter 17. It remains alive and well in us and around us.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Bringing Low and Drying Up*

We are not our own saviors. Instead, our sinful condition becomes the most profound kind of captivity. Confronting human pride in words similar to Hannah's song (1 Samuel 2) and Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1), Ezekiel says that the Lord will bring low the high tree and dry up the green ones. Our projects to be our own gods, control our own fates, and be our own saviors will justly and inevitably be chopped down and dry up.

PROGNOSIS: God's Holy Tree

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Tree of Life*

Reminiscent of God's promises in Isaiah 11, the Lord confronts

human sin and emptiness by promising to establish a righteous tree on the heights of Israel. Indeed, the tree of Christ's cross on the Hill of the Skull puts an end to sin and announces the life of God for us. The cross of Christ is the tree of life that endures forever.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *A Righteous Branch*

Under the shadow of this righteous tree, the proud are humbled. This is good news for us who suffer from the proud plans of the world around us and the self-justifying plans of our own hearts. God casts those vanities down, in us and around us, and raises us up in truth and life. The lowly (including us and our newly humbled hearts) are lifted up and sheltered by this tree. We receive holy life and protection in the cross out of sheer grace. Further, the Lord makes this happen simply by speaking it: "I the LORD have spoken; I will accomplish it." God willing, this effective Word includes the promises of life and love announced by preachers in our assemblies this week.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Shelter for All*

Remember the shallow plans discussed in Step 1? They are overcome by God's righteousness. God replaces vain human plans with life under the cross. This life is characterized by the love and grace that comes first from God and becomes a love freely shared with "birds of all kinds," that is, with all neighbors near and far. Instead of fighting for our own plans or interests, we are free to delight in the well-being of those around us, for they too find protection and goodness in the cross, God's tree of life.