**First Reading Ezekiel 17:22-24**

*Tree imagery is used in a messianic prophecy to tell how the Lord will choose someone from Judah’s royal family (the cedar tree) to reign over all creation. This tree will be planted on Mount Zion, the location of the holy temple.*

22Thus 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. 23On 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. 24All 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.

**Psalm 92:1-4,12-15**

1 It is a good thing to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praise to your name, O Most High; 2 to herald your love in the morning and your faithfulness at night; 3 on the psaltery, and on the lyre, and to the melody of the harp. 4For you have made me glad by your acts, O Lord; and I shout for joy because of the works of your hands. 12The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree and shall spread abroad like a cedar of Lebanon. 13Those who are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God; 14they shall still bear fruit in old age; they shall be green and succulent; 15that they may show how upright the Lord is, my rock, in whom there is no injustice.

**Second Reading 2 Corinthians 5:6-17**

*Paul encourages believers to live by faith and not by sight. We do not consider Jesus from a human perspective but through the eyes of faith, believing he died for all and was raised. All who are in Christ are now in God’s new creation.*

6 So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord—7 for we walk by faith, not by sight. 8Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. 9 So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. 10For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil. 11Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade

others; but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences. 12We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart. 13For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. 14For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore, all have died. 15And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. 16From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. 17So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

**Gospel Mark 4:26-34**

*Jesus frequently uses parables to teach ordinary people as they are able to hear and understand. Images of sowing and growing show the vitality of God’s kingdom.*

26Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,27and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. 28The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. 29But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.” 30He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? 31It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 32yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.” 33With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; 34he did not speak to them in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples

**Sermon**

As we drive east on Rt.224 past the Panera Bread here in Canfield, my husband Robert and I can’t help but comment on how quickly the Aldi’s behind Wendy’s is going up. Yes, in case you didn’t know, that building is going to be Aldi’s. But it is amazing to see the progress and marvel at how this human effort can result in the formation of a full building so quickly. But that seems to be the case these days, at least in situations where the money is there! Buildings go up in no time, as though it is just a kit that someone has to put together.

That seems to be the way of things in our time. We’ve actually seen quite a bit of development in this area in recent years, even right now…it seems there is a car wash apparently being built across from Giant Eagle, but a new car wash went in next to Meijer recently, a building is going up on the Green on the corner of S Broad St and Lisbon St and it looks like work is starting on the old IGA building along the northwest side of the Green. We will watch these things and other local development projects and comment on how slowly or quickly the projects seem to be moving, but we will most likely all live to see them completed.

That is certainly a different pace than building things in ancient times, even up until the 20th Century. New equipment, new technology, new materials have led to this shorter building time. I imagine we’ve gotten accustomed to everything happening more quickly because the world we live in today is a world with a fast-paced mentality. Time is money! Forget the old saying that Rome wasn’t built in a day; we want it built yesterday!

However, no matter how many ages, millennia, centuries, decades have passed, no matter how advanced the technology is, there are at least 2 processes that haven’t sped up. One is the process of the growth of vegetation and the other is the process of the spreading of the kingdom of God. Now, I’m always in a danger zone when I try to speak about plants because I have little knowledge about caring for or growing things. So maybe there is some sort of product out there that can make things grow faster. But in nature, without any human interference, plants grow according to their own timing and processes. It is this mysterious process that happens outside of our control, in its own time.

It is to this process that Jesus compares the kingdom of God…mysterious, outside of our control, in its own time, or we can say in God’s time. Up to this point in the story…this is only Chapter 3 in Mark’s gospel…while Jesus is healing people and casting out unclean spirits, his family has already questioned his sanity and the religious leaders are questioning the source of his authority. While good things are happening, there is also pushback. It is possible that Jesus’ followers are having their doubts about this movement into which Jesus invited them. Is it going to be squashed? Is it going to fizzle under pressure?

We worry just like they did, don’t we? We worry about the future of our faith. We worry because there aren’t as many people in the pews around us anymore. We worry because society doesn’t necessarily support the practice of our Christian faith anymore. We worry

because there is some hostility towards our faith and faith leaders. The landscape of the Christian faith and church is changing, and we worry because we’ve never seen something like this happen before.

But the kingdom of God is mysterious and out of our control and functioning on God’s timeline. AND God is faithful. The story of God’s faithfulness to humanity runs throughout the pages of Scripture but is most powerfully revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the pouring out of the Spirit onto all flesh at Pentecost. God is committed to humanity, so God will not quit. But as God demonstrated through the cross and by choosing to dwell in sinful humanity, God’s ways are strange, maybe even offensive to humanity and yet have been powerful in the unfolding of God’s kingdom in this world.

Jesus follows up the first parable with the second parable. The second parable compares the kingdom of God to a mustard seed growing into the greatest of all shrubs. As I hear that, I recall places in the Old Testament, like in today’s passage from Ezekiel, where nations are described as mighty, noble trees and take note that here Jesus is likening the kingdom to an shrub. This shrub is not mighty and noble. But it IS going to grow, at least enough that birds can nest in it. What I hear is Jesus saying that this kingdom of God is not mighty and powerful, it isn’t something that is going to be grand and respectable. It is something that is going to grow…and grow…and grow.

In this parable I hear Jesus saying that this kingdom of God will spread, will grow like an out-of-control shrub or weed. This kingdom of God may not be viewed favorably by those looking for what is grand and respectable and noble and mighty. But it is going to give room, give space to everyone. Jesus was healing and freeing people with disease, with unclean spirits. The kingdom was growing where there was human suffering, and the growth was seen when they were relieved, set free of their burden.

Certainly, the kingdom grows when we hear the good news that Christ has set us free from the burden of our sin. This kingdom, this good news is for those who are being burdened by sin or by the oppression of other human beings. THAT is when and where we will see the kingdom of God grow and bear fruit. When those who have been treated inhumanely are told that they matter and are loved by God. When those who are excluded are given a place at the table. When we as the body of Christ speak up on behalf of those who suffer…when the work

of releasing people from suffering and oppression and mistreatment are celebrated…there is the great mustard shrub, there is the kingdom of God among us. Amen.

Gracious God, on this Father’s Day

We’re especially thankful for the

Fathers and father figures in our lives.

Hold them in your good care.

Give them patience, wisdom and

Strength, that through them their

Families may experience your

Unconditional love.

Bless those who long to be fathers and

Those for whom this day is difficult.

A statue of a praying hands

Description automatically generatedAmen