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"The Tree That God Planted" The Rev. Garrett Lane (06/16/2024, The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost)

Let us pray.

Almighty God made the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight.

O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer.

Amen.

In the 1993 film Groundhog Day, their main character Phil Connors is played, thank you for laughing, Jerry, just for me, bring up Groundhog Day.

I appreciate that.

Phil Connors is played by Bill Murray.

When he wakes up every morning to his clock radio, screeching at him, full volume, Sonny and Sherry, I got you, babe, is full blast.

And as that song is coming to an end, the DJ gets on in shouts every morning in this film.

And this morning happens many times in this film.

This is about a man who relives the same day over and over and over again.

And the DJ gets on in shouts, good morning campers and continues on his jovial back and forth with the other DJ.

And the most, if you like listening to this kind of radio, I commend you.

It is not for me, generally, to hear talk radio in this way.

But this man Phil is stuck reliving this day, time and time again.

There's a movie unfolds that Panasonic Flip Clock goes from 5.59 to 6am nearly a dozen times throughout the film.

The creator of the film has said that this man Phil lives close to 36 years in the same day.

And the film doesn't show all of those, obviously.

But the words start to kind of lose their meaning as time goes on.

And the chair starts to just become background noise.

This good morning campers just as this doldrum, this beat that he hears every day as these days blend together.

And words start to lose their meaning.

In the same way, this can happen in our own conversations.

If you ask anyone, especially in acquaintance, or a coworker, or someone that you know that's a friend of a friend,

if you ask them how they're doing, how's your day?

What's up? You see someone in the grocery store?

There's a set of responses that people generally give that annoy me.

And I want to tell you about them right now, because I've got the

pulpit.

So if somebody says how's it going, they can respond sometimes.  
And I'm guilty of these two, so don't, like I'm not single in anyone now.

But they can say it's going. That's the response.

It's going. What kind of response is it's going?

Of course it's going. I'm asking you.

You can have the infamous at the end of kind of someone who's resigned.

It is what it is. Yeah, it is what it is.

And then this one, they do really annoy me.

This one upon a goodbye. I'll see you when I see you.

And I know you'll see me when you see me. It'll be in the future.

These kinds of things that they fill a space and they're polite, which is why we say them.

And it's good that we're polite to each other.

But they just kind of fill this space.

And they don't have a ton of meaning behind them.

This cryptic talk.

This cryptic talk can keep us sane.

It can keep other people away from us at arm's length.

It allows us to be polite.

It allows us to hide our true feelings about if someone's saying goodbye to us.

And we don't really care to see them again.

And I don't want to see you when I'll see you later.

I don't have to say that to their face.

But these things, these cryptic things that we say, when words lose their meaning,

happen in our readings and happen with a certain set of stories that get told in the Bible,

both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, in parables.

Where words start to kind of, we know they mean something else, but we're not totally sure what the meaning is.

And if you are unfamiliar with the term parable,

a parable is something that shows up both in Old and in New Testament.

And a parable is something that we think generally is something we can try to understand,

but it's not usually something that we can understand.

And the Bible is always talking about plants.

It's always talking about plants in these parables.

What kind of mustard were the first century folks eating is my biggest question after we read Mark.

Are we talking grape upon? Are we talking hind? I just would like to know.

But I want to tell you about Ezekiel, our Old Testament reading, who has a parable of itself.

I want to tell you more about Jesus' parables, what God says to us, and I want to tell you about pruning trees.

So, Ezekiel might not be the most well-known book of the Bible to you.

If you were to open the Old Testament, it might not be the one that flops open, and it has all of the dog ears and the highlights and all the things that I know your Bibles have. But the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel is writing, during a time when the Israelites had gone into exile, they had left their home, that he had left his home in Jerusalem, and he lived in Babylon. He lived far away. They were taken in war, the best of the best, and even the mediocre of the best were all taken from Jerusalem. And the only people that they left were the destitute, those who couldn't work. They took engineers, doctors, lawyers, scholars, priests. They did not take the day laborers. They all left them in Jerusalem. But all of these people that were very far from home wanted to return home. They wanted to return to Jerusalem. And the book of Ezekiel accounts for Ezekiel's encounter with God in talking about this return home, talking about this desire to go back to the land where the temple was, where they could worship God. And so Ezekiel is a prophet because he has an experience with God. A prophet is not someone who rolls the dice and is able to tell you next week how much rain we're going to get, which would be very nice at this point in Waco especially. But a prophet is someone who gets a word from God and writes it down and has to tell that word of God. It's this burning thing inside of them that has to come out. Prophets are not called prophets because they read tea leaves time the market. They are prophets because they have something to say about the living God. And these prophets are not always the most direct authors. They talk in riddles. They talk in parables. They talk in roundabout ways. And it's also Jesus' preferred method of teaching. In roundabout ways about who God is, what the kingdom of God looks like. Farmer knows where to plant the best seeds. We heard from that section of Mark that the kingdom of God is like a farmer who throws seed down in verse 26. And sleeps. And he doesn't know how the seed comes to life. I don't know if you know any farmers, but they make their living by knowing when seeds are going to come up. They make their living by knowing where to plant a certain seed. And they know if everything works well and weather is always a component. But they know what's going to happen when they put something in the ground. These parables need explaining.

Our texts need explaining.  
They need communal explaining.  
Not just one person talking about it, but us talking together.  
Verse 24 in Ezekiel says this.  
I bring low, this is God speaking.  
I bring low the high tree.  
I make high the low tree.  
I try up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.  
I the Lord have spoken. I will accomplish it.  
Ezekiel gives us this message from God that is bouncing around the Old Testament and end in the New Testament.  
That what God is doing is hard to perceive.  
But it is a good thing and God has promised life and life in abundance.  
And the dry tree turns green and the low tree gets high and the high tree gets low.  
We shouldn't expect everything to magically make sense when we hear it, just because it comes from the Bible.  
We hear the Word of God and we interpret it. We digest it. We talk with others about it.  
Not one of us is an island with perfect understanding, although many days I would like to be and maybe some of you would like to be.  
No, we are apart. We are under the shade of this tree.  
That is the church that God has planted and God has taken care of.  
And this church, this tree grows out of the cross.  
I wish our cross was still up here, but it's down right now.  
I like pointing to it when I'm preaching.  
This church grows out of the cross, it grows out of Jesus and it gives us all shade and it bears fruit.  
What Ezekiel gives us is that the things that we think will take us out for good are actually the things that bring us closer to God.  
Remember, he's riding an exile, forced march, his loved ones have died, his home is in ruins, he's homesick.  
His word is that God will take what is broken, broken in a people, broken in an individual and it can be made new.  
It will be made new and he will care for it, he will nurture it and God will grow it.  
Even in the death of Jesus, the work of God is obscured from what's going on.  
The glorification of Jesus Christ on the cross did not look like glorification to the people standing around.  
It looked like their beloved friend and teacher was being killed and then he died.  
It did not look like the glory that we now see it.  
They mourned and those who saw the resurrection were but Christ and God the Father.  
Theologian Robert Jensen says that God simply is the one who reverses the judgments of today.  
God reverses the judgments of today.  
His message as the child of Mary is that the first will be last and

the last will be first.

God's message in the form of a carpenter comes from the form of a carpenter from a backwater nowhere.

His message in glory when he comes again will be coming from his humility in his time on earth.

God takes what is low and God raises it up.

When you're wanting a tree to flourish, I don't know if you've taken care of trees.

When you're wanting a tree to flourish, it might sound weird but you have to cut back a lot of the tree.

You have to do some pruning.

This is well known to farmers, is well known to people who landscapers all sorts of folks.

And if you walk around in the fall and in the spring at certain times of the year, you'll see trees that are cut down to certain ways.

Pruning is this process of strategically cutting back so that growth can happen so that people can be fed by fruit trees so that branches won't fall on your house when a storm comes.

This is why we prune trees.

My great grandpa had these trees in his backyard.

He had a walnut tree that I hated because we had to prune it every year.

We had to make the walnuts down, we had to prune it.

And I, as a young kid, just really hated having to go over to my grandpa's house.

But I loved the walnuts that came later.

Every Thanksgiving, we would have walnuts in all sorts of things.

And this idea that we can cut and we get these good things from kind of the things that cut away, it makes sense to us.

Where it doesn't make sense is when we think about God as this pruner who is just cutting and cutting and cutting away at your life and whacking away at branches in our own life.

God's not here to cut down the tree.

It's not cut down us as trees.

God is here to help us grow, to raise us up.

God gives growth.

Dead trees become alive again.

In the passage from Ezekiel, he takes the sprig of a cedar.

I hate cedars. They make me sneeze in February.

Cedars are horrible.

And in this passage, he takes a cedar and it grows fruit for the people.

It grows fruit for the whole world and it shades everyone.

If you're at all like anyone else, you have been a low tree or currently a low tree, a dead tree, a tree that has no leaves, a cedar making people sneeze.

You are likely or have been or will be in these low places.

You have been cut down to size, not by God but by life.

You have been cut down in large lies that you tell and small lies that you tell in the ways in which people lie to us.

The betrayal that comes from the person that we just did not expect it to come from.

You were told that someone loved you and then they tell you that they don't love you.

You don't need God bringing shears and wrecking you and cutting you down because that's not who God is.

And if you're anything like me, I do a good enough job doing that to myself.

I don't need God to do that.

Look at what Ezekiel says.

God is the one that has planted this tree that is Christ.

From the wood of the cross grows this tree that bears fruit.

And it bears bread and it bears wine and it nourishes our souls when we are cut down the low.

The good news of Christ is that God can take what we have become.

All warped and changed and gnarled and all of these ways in which we are not an ideal tree.

And God can take a sprig from that and make something new and make something grow and make something feed others.

Springing from something new and it is watered from the water in us, baptismal font that sits in the middle of our church.

It's gift from the Holy Spirit.

Our friend and our advocate, the Lord Jesus Christ has made this happen with his redeeming work on the cross.

And thanks be to God for that work. Amen.