

Ezekiel 17:22-24

July 2, 2006 – 4<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

## The Sovereign LORD Grows His Kingdom

† **Planting where and when He wills (vv.22,23)**

† **Causing fruit to flourish and grow (vv.23,24)**

In the name of Jesus, the LORD's own Messiah, dear flourishing trees of God:

One of my favorite movies would be good for our 4<sup>th</sup> of July, American Independence Day. The opening scene has Mel Gibson, *The Patriot*, making a rocking chair as a well-to-do Carolina plantation owner trying to stay out of the war with the British. His wife died leaving him with several sons and daughters for whom he cares deeply. But at the moment all his attention is glued to this rocking chair which he is about to put to the ultimate test. With his little daughter watching in his woodshop, he very carefully eases into the rocker. A smile of satisfaction spreads across his face as he turns in triumph toward his little girl. She's holding her breath as he gently rocks backwards. A sudden crack, and there he is lying on the floor while his daughter covers her ears. He hurls the rocking chair across the barn onto a whole pile of broken rocking chairs. It's what the British thought of every "Patriot."

What if we had lost that war or the First or Second World War? What if we lose the war which Islam wages against "the people of the Book"? It's not enough to say we would all be speaking German or Japanese or Arabic. In every war anti-Christian religion has been at least part of our conflict. But looking honestly at American history don't we have to admit how little we deserve God's grace and mercy? If God had not helped us for Jesus' sake, let's just say we could better feel the absolute despair of Ezekiel's listeners and their vital encouragement to hear: **The Sovereign LORD Grows His Kingdom...**

† **Planting where and when He wills (vv.22,23)**

We have to be very careful in our patriotic love of country to give God the glory for His kindness to our native land. As the God-inspired Psalmist put it: ***"If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared."*** (Psalm 130:3f KJV)

To see where Ezekiel and the Israelites were standing in this text, try to imagine you are one of the chosen people of God, citizens of the one physical nation that the great Creator claimed as His very own. Your ancient history of slavery in Egypt ended with the devastation of that great super power. God marched your people through the Red Sea on dry land, then fed you manna in the desert. For forty years your shoes never wore out. The flood-swollen River Jordan piled up so you could cross on dry land. The walls of Jericho came tumbling down along with every nation that dared to oppose the armies of your God. The entire Promised Land was ruled by your greatest King David. His son Solomon built a magnificent temple for the LORD on Mount Zion. But that was nearly 500 years ago. And now the Temple has been burned to the ground, the city of Jerusalem with its wall demolished, and you are exiled far away in Iraq, then called Babylon, under cruel King Nebuchadnezzar. Tears burn your heart.

But you like listening to the Prophet Ezekiel there in Babylon with you. He has an entertaining way of saying things you'll not soon forget. Everyone listening knows he's not actually talking about eagles and cedar trees. These are metaphors, picture language for the terrible things that have happened that took you so far from home into such depths of despair. King Nebuchadnezzar was like a mighty eagle that swooped down on your native land. Your King Zedekiah grew toward him like a cedar tree seeking the sun. But another great eagle came from Egypt to the south. There you were, little Judah, caught between the world's two super powers. What could your king do but try to chose the winner? He turned toward Egypt, but Egypt lost. The prophet Jeremiah warned it was a bad decision!

At times like this none of us want someone to say, "I told you so." But then as now God's Word has been warning us since our first parents in the Garden heard the LORD God say: ***"On the day that you***

*eat of [that forbidden fruit] you will surely die.”* We shake our heads in wonder at the Israelites rebelling against God in spite of all the miracles, but we’ve seen them too on the pages of God’s Holy Bible. Yet conservative Christians sometimes try to tell me they can’t come to worship because of work. Few realize how quickly such a blessing like a job becomes our idol. It struck me last week that every time I’m tempted to protect my job by saying what people want to hear, my face is mashed up against the First Commandment by lust for money rather than love for my Maker. To preach God’s Word in its truth and purity I must crucify my old sinful nature and say, “Come what may, God will be my first, last and always – even if it means losing my job.” God has to **“break off a tender sprig from [the] topmost shoots [of that tall cedar in order to] plant it on a high and lofty mountain.”** Sometimes God has to break our heart from love to save us from an American idol. Sometimes He must break down the walls of our pride by taking away the job in which we trust instead of Him. He may even have to destroy His own temple where His Holy Spirit dwells in this body before we finally realize how fleeting is this life of change and decay. Flat on our back, we can finally see how much we need our Creator to also redeem and sanctify us. God’s plow must break up the soil of our hard hearts for the **Sovereign LORD** to do His **Planting where and when He wills**. But like the skillful farmer, He has one great goal in mind:

### † **Causing fruit to flourish and grow (vv.23,24)**

Sometimes it’s shocking when I finally get to sit down with members and listen to their life over the past several months. In the midst of trouble we easily grow so tired and weary that we don’t always realize what a heavy load we’re carrying. But in the heat of the sun we start to stumble and fall under the weight of disappointment and responsibility. Sometimes the best of us can’t help throwing up our hands in dismay and ask, “What next?” And maybe even, “God, what do you really want from me?”

Do you suppose Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, worshiped idols back in Judah before Nebuchadnezzar carried them off to Babylon in the First Deportation? Their faithfulness in Exile suggests they came from that tiny Remnant of devout believers who still taught their children to worship the LORD and Him only. They knew their sin, but they also knew their Savior would come in the Person of Jesus the Messiah. Daniel prayed, **“The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him.”** (Daniel 9:9) They trusted in the LORD our Righteousness.

But what do you do when bad things happen to good people trusting in the LORD? You’ve been faithfully worshipping the Lord, reading your Bible, receiving the Holy Sacrament – and yet, friends keep running out, bills keep piling up and then the car breaks down or someone gets sick or hurt and can’t work. Mutual of Omaha can’t always help the *Wild Kingdom*. “God, what kind of kingdom is this if even your own people suffer such shame and disgrace that everyone turns away in disgust?”

Dear friends, dear doubting hearts, where are Egypt and Babylon, or the Third Reich or the Soviet Union for that matter? Earthy kingdoms are piled high on the ash heap of history, yet God’s Word endures. He’s still **Causing fruit to flourish and grow** in His Kingdom of grace: **“On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches. All the trees of the field will know that I the LORD bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it.”** 500 years before Christ it was as good as done simply because God promised. You want proof? God’s own Son hung on the cross in your place and mine. A guarantee? Not even death could keep Him in the grave. Our living hope? Christ Jesus rules all things from God’s right hand. These eyes can’t see Him, but faith surely does. And someday soon these eyes will too along with Job who said, **“I know that my Redeemer lives....”** (Job 19:25) Your dried up life is God’s opportunity to green up the dry tree again. In blessed hope we wait for the Lord to cause good fruit to grow and flourish. The dear Holy Spirit plows and plants and waters with Word and sacraments. Jesus still says, **“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”** (John 15:5 NIV) And that’s true of every Christian even if you never build a rocking chair. Amen.