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Ezekiel 17:22-24

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It still brings me a smile to recall a skit put on by one of my classmates way back in seminary days. This fellow was from North Carolina. His skit was a take off on a sermon by southern preachers -- preachers for whom the seminarian had much affection, but also gently kidded. So, the preacher steps into the pulpit and begins *shouting* at the people. He starts off like this: "This is a sermon about SIN. And *you* know what I'm talking about!"

Well, ever once in a while it does seem right to talk about such a broad subject as sin, to try to see the forest for the trees and to remind ourselves of some fundamental Christian convictions. So, this is a sermon about sin. I preach it because you people matter to me and I do not want you to labor for that which does not satisfy, and so do not want you, nor me, to be labor for sin. My theme is this: Sin *cannot* succeed. Sin aims too high, it overreaches itself when it imagines that in the end, it can stand. Let me tell you why. I mean my sermon text this morning, from Ezekiel 17. The LORD says this:

²⁴And all the trees of the field shall know that *I the LORD* bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I the LORD have spoken, and *I* will do it. (Ezekiel 17:24, RSV)

The "Thousand Year Reich" lasted, what? a dozen years at best. And even if it had lasted a thousand years, in the end it could not have succeeded, built as it was on such wickedness. It could not have succeeded -- literally! As certain as is any law of physics or astronomy, this too is certain: sin cannot succeed. All the madness of sin did was to waste, waste, waste the lives of those who sinned and laid low millions of victims. But none of that shall stand for the Lord has spoken: he himself will "bring low the high tree and make high the low tree." High trees of sin are destined not for glory, but for being brought low, and those poor people who have been brought low have a Savior on their side, who delights in making high the low tree.

Likewise with any foolishness we ourselves might be contemplating. That beckoning affair, for example, that adultery that threatens to break someone's heart, can it succeed? No, it cannot succeed. If it is unworthy of Jesus, it is unworthy of us and cannot stand.

Let me set this sermon verse in the context of the full chapter of Ezekiel 17.

I hope it will help us to forsake sin on the simple grounds that in the end, sin cannot succeed.

The Seventeenth Chapter of Ezekiel expresses the LORD's frustration at the foolish foreign policy of King Zedekiah¹ of Judah. These things happened about six hundred years before the birth of Christ. King Zedekiah was a puppet king of the great Babylonian Empire, which had defeated Judah and sent so many leading Israelites into Babylonian exile. It is not much fun to be a vassal state, under the authority of a conqueror, yet as these things go, life was pretty good for Zedekiah and Judah. Babylon permitted Judah to flourish and to gain a modest standing in the world.

But Zedekiah was restless with this and so he conspired with Egypt to overthrow the Babylonian rule. Zedekiah pressed for rebellion against Babylon. But this was political madness in the eyes of the Lord. It had little chance of success, and indeed, it failed miserably. But there was more at stake than foolishness. Also there was the matter of honor and fidelity to solemn promises. For when Zedekiah had been made king, he had sworn loyalty to Babylon. Furthermore, he had to swear loyalty in the name of his god, which was the very God of Israel. To enter into rebellion against Babylon was both treacherous and a misuse of God's name. I mean, I cannot imagine King David, for example, doing such a thing. David would either have refused to be made king in the name of the LORD or he would have been true to his promise and not conspired against Babylon.

Now, I do not want to be too hard on Zedekiah about this. He was probably trying to do the best he could, and if his foreign policy proved to be foolish, well, he was neither the first ruler nor the last to be foolish.

What interests me more is the simple question, Can it succeed? This foolish, unfaithful policy: can it succeed? Can anything stand that opposes the will of God? We must train ourselves to remember that we are going to meet our Maker, and all our human projects are going to be measured by him. So, let us aim for those projects that we think can stand in that day.

Let me read aloud for us a key passage from the Seventeenth Chapter of Ezekiel. It is a passage probing the policy of Zedekiah using a parable of eagles and a vine. The first eagle represents King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. The second eagle represents Pharaoh Neco of Egypt. The vine represents Judah, flourishing where the LORD had planted her -- flourishing, that is, until the king conspired with Egypt and rebelled against Babylon. Here is the parable:

¹ 597-587 B.C.

[A great eagle²] took one of the country's seeds
and put it in a fertile field;
by the side of a generous stream,
like a willow tree, he placed it.
⁶It grew and became a fruitful vine
of modest size,
grew up towards the eagle,
its roots grew downwards.
So it became a vine,
branching out and sprouting new shoots.

⁷But there was another great eagle³
with great wings and thick plumage.
And now the vine twisted its roots towards him
and stretched its branches towards him,
for him to water it
away from the bed where it was planted.

⁸It was in a fertile field, by the side of a wide stream
that the vine had been planted,
to branch out and bear fruit
and become a noble vine.”

⁹Say, “The Lord Yahweh says this: Will it succeed?
Will the eagle not tear out its roots
and strip off its fruit,
so that all the new leaves it puts out will wither,
and no great strength is needed nor many people
to pull it up by the roots?

¹⁰Planted it may be -- will it succeed? (Ezekiel 17:5-10, NJB)

And that is the haunting question: “Planted it may be -- will it succeed?”

This is the context for this morning's reading about a noble cedar, and
“under it will dwell all kinds of beasts; in the shade of its branches birds of
every sort will nest.”(Ezekiel 17:23) The most striking thing about this reading is
that the LORD says that he himself will do this. No longer will he make use of
other eagles -- rulers like Nebuchadnezzar or Pharaoh. No, in our passage the
LORD promises that one day he himself will be the eagle who plants a twig on
a mountain top and that twig shall grow up and become a noble cedar that will

² Babylon, according to the will of the God of Israel.

³ Pharaoh Neco of Egypt.

give shade to all the other trees of this earth and will provide shelter for creation.

And so it is that our passage promises that one day, the rulers of this age, with their mixture of wisdom and foolishness, will be replaced by a Ruler who will judge rightly, and who will lift up the low and bring down the high.

We are Christians and so when we read this divine promise, our hearts naturally go to Jesus, and we believe we have found the Man. Jesus is the noble Cedar who will provide shade for all the nations and all creation, who will raise up the low and bring down the high. Jesus is the one who takes a child, sets him in the midst of the disciples, and teaches them that if one would be great in the kingdom, that one must be “last of all, and servant of all.”(Mark 9:35, KJV). Jesus is the one who preached that “many that are first shall be last ; and the last shall be first.”(Matthew 19:30, KJV) Indeed, Jesus is the one who though he was first, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but from deep love, reversed in his own life the usual way things go in this world:

⁷ But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: ⁸ And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. (Philippians 2:7-8, KJV)

Jesus as the great Cedar providing shade for the world, elevating the low and bringing down the high: This is what brings me back to that soul-searching question, “Will this succeed?” Of one thing I am entirely persuaded: Sin cannot succeed. Sin will fail in the end because Jesus - the great Cedar tree - will see to it.

What, then, of our projects in life? What of our hopes and dreams, our striving and our suffering? Well, to the degree that our striving is towards love and goodness after the pattern of Jesus, it will succeed. And to the degree our striving is toward sin, it is wasted, wasted time and effort.

You know this! Many of you have heard from your mother’s knee. Sin is senseless. Sin does not pay. It cannot stand for long. It can only work itself out as regret. And the bigger the sin, the more regretting we have in store for us.

And there is no point in saying that sin is not sin. We are not the ones who get to decide that. The Lord does. It is too late for us to imagine that we get to decide what is sin and what is not. We learned that lesson long ago in the Garden of Eden: “Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?” Genesis 3:1, KJV) It has always been Satan’s lure, to imagine that we are the ones who can doubt the teaching of the Lord.

Yon temptation: do not yield to it! It can only lead to disappointment. And pity the sinful one who flourishes, for he shall not flourish for long. Better the poor honest man’s bit of bread and butter than the rich sinner’s sumptuous

feast, with the law breathing down his neck, with the prayers of hungry people rising up against him, and with Jesus set to bring low the high and to raise up the low.

If there is a way in which I might differ from some southern preacher ranting and railing against sin, it would be this: I am not trying to frighten us away from sin, but to free us toward the manner of life we ourselves know to be the best. I'm saying, turn to the good, for only the good can stand.

Consider the saying about how the great Cedar will raise up the low. Well, compared to God, that is each of us! No matter how good we might be or how sinful, compared to God we are all low. And so the promise that Jesus will raise up the low has got to be good news. But my point is that it is even better news for those who have not been wasting their time on projects that cannot stand.

Spittin' in the wind. That's what I'm trying to save myself and you from doing: spittin' in the wind.

Planted we may be -- will we succeed? Yes, in Christ we will succeed and our deeds will not have been done in vain if they are done for him, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.