

PENTECOST 4

Proper 6 - Year B

Amy Crawford has, for the last 20 years, worked at the intersection of ministry and psychology. She holds a Masters in Clinical and Counseling Psychology, with a concentration in adolescent psychology and pastoral counseling. Amy has worked as a trauma and spirituality therapist for youth and young adults; worked as Associate Pastor of Spiritual Care and Counseling at Liquid Church, a top-100 fastest growing church in the US, and is currently in the process of becoming ordained in The Episcopal Church and receiving a M.Div from General Theological Seminary. She also consults as an organizational psychologist and as a trauma/neurodiversity specialist to various organizations, including seminaries and para-church organizations. Amy, along with her husband, are parents to four daughters. In her (few) spare moments, she is a classically trained professional pianist who enjoys playing Bach, an avid native-plants gardener, and is passionate about liturgy and Benedictine spirituality.

Note: During the 2024 Season after Pentecost, Sermons That Work will use Track 2 readings for sermons and Bible studies. Please consult our archives for many additional Track 1 resources from prior years.

Ezekiel 17:22-24

²²Thus says the Lord God:

I myself will take a sprig
from the lofty top of the cedar;
I will set it out.

I will break off a tender shoot
from the topmost of its young twigs;

I myself will transplant it
on a high and lofty mountain.

²³On the mountain height of Israel
I will transplant it,
and it will 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.

Commentary from Amy Crawford

That which is great is made small, that which is small will be exalted. This theme pops up over and over again in Scripture, woven into parable and narrative. In Ezekiel, we encounter it in rich and evocative imagery; a poetic vision by the prophet who is deep in exile. He sees a small twig, broken from a great tree, planted atop a mountain. The twig itself grows into a mighty cedar brimming with life, a safe home and respite for birds.

Parable-like in nature, this passage is orienting the reader not just toward God's work in creation, but toward a specific figure: one who is considered small and humble, yet through God's plan to make something new from the old, becomes the very resting place for life. All the other "trees" around this figure will look to it and know that the God of Israel, truly, is the God who exalts the lowly and creates and sustains life. What a gift and inspiration this image must have been for those in exile, for whom this passage was written: that with nothing but a transplanted twig, something great will grow. God will sustain not just life, but life *abundant*.

Discussion Questions

What are the "twigs" in your life out of which God has grown something great?

Psalm 92:1-4, 11-14

- 1 It is a good thing to give thanks to the Lord, *
and to sing praises to your Name, O Most
High;
- 2 To tell of your loving-kindness early in the morning
*
and of your faithfulness in the night season;
- 3 On the psaltery, and on the lyre, *
and to the melody of the harp.
- 4 For you have made me glad by your acts, O Lord; *
and I shout for joy because of the works of
your hands.
- 11 The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree, *
and shall spread abroad like a cedar of
Lebanon.
- 12 Those who are planted in the house of the Lord *
shall flourish in the courts of our God;
- 13 They shall still bear fruit in old age; *
they shall be green and succulent;
- 14 That they may show how upright the Lord is, *
my Rock, in whom there is no fault.

Commentary from Amy Crawford

What happens when God's people are gathered together in worship? The psalmist in today's passage points us toward the answer: the flourishing of life itself. Through the psalm, we see references to praise in the morning and night, song with harps and lyres, and the house of God which give us an image of the faithful on the Sabbath, turned toward the power of God in their life. In this gathering together, God's faithful acts are remembered and joy rises. Grounded deep in gratitude for God's work on our behalf, we are imagined to be like trees: roots grow deep and multiply, fruits of God's spirit ripen and are abundant, and this flourishing is visible for all to see. God's gathered people are like a great forest, a haven for life.

Discussion Questions

When you gather with God's people in worship, what takes root and grows for you?

2 Corinthians 5:6-10, [11-13,] 14-17

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. ⁸ Yes, 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 be pleasing to him. ¹⁰ For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive due recompense for actions done in the body, whether good or evil.

[¹¹ Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade people, but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences. ¹² We 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. ¹³ For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.]

¹⁴ For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for the one who for their sake died and was raised.

¹⁶ From 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 no longer know him in that way. ¹⁷ So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being!

Commentary from Amy Crawford

When we imagine appearing before the judgment seat of Christ, it's hard not to let centuries of artistic renderings sway our thoughts. Images of a mighty Jesus with a pointed (often accusing) finger, people being swept left or right, others kneeling and weeping. It doesn't exactly inspire confidence!

Yet Paul guides us toward exactly that: confidence. Paul builds an argument for our boldness, our confidence in approaching the throne of Jesus, as well as approaching others with the message of salvation. It is "the love of Christ" that urges us on, Paul says - a sacrificial, beautiful, life-giving love that leads a God to become like us, to give up everything so that we might have everything. Paul tells us that we are to see all others no longer "from a human point of view," and the implication is that we are to look at others through Jesus' eyes: eyes full of faith and life-creating love, eyes that can't help but see beloved new beings. If this is how we are to look at others, how much more will Christ look at us in this way on Judgment Day? How much more will Jesus see us in our vulnerability and desire to continue to make us new?

This gives us a new framework for walking by faith, not by sight. It isn't as if we have closed our eyes and are stumbling in the dark. Rather, it is as if we have put on a filter over our vision - a sort of Jesus-lens, if you will, that lets us see the world as Christ sees it. A vision full of faith in God's good creation and the ever-inbreaking work of God in the world through our hands and feet (and sight!).

Discussion Questions

Take a moment to think about how Christ sees you. Is it full of love and faith? Or is it full of judgment?

What would it be like to put on "Jesus-lenses" and look at the world around you? How might your day change?

Mark 4:26-34

²⁶ He also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground ²⁷ and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸ The earth produces of itself first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle because the harvest has come.”

³⁰ He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, ³² yet 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.”

³³ With many such parables he spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it; ³⁴ he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Commentary from Amy Crawford

Gardening is strange work, isn't it? On one hand, there is real effort on our part: watering and weeding and sowing and reaping. Yet in the vast majority of the work – the slow but steady miracle of plants unfolding, fruits growing, and petals unfurling - we can't really do anything but watch in wonder.

Planting, growing, and harvesting all take a central place in Jesus' parables, and for good reason. It's a marriage of human initiative and the movements of natural forces, a dance between that which can be managed and that which is totally out of our control. It makes for fertile ground (pun intended!) for helping us understand what it means to be called by God to co-create, to plant seeds and watch something wonderful unfold, guided by God's power.

As Jesus continues his mission, he is reminding his disciples and those who have been following him of this truth through these parables. There was a reason the disciples were attracted to Jesus: clearly, they knew that something wonder - a kind of new life - was coming with Jesus' work and word. Yet they kept fumbling it. Metaphorically forgetting to water, neglecting to prune, letting weeds run wild. Despite this, people kept coming – folks were being healed, fed, loved, and called. Even in the imperfect work of the disciples, there was a bountiful harvest. Even with their tiny seeds of faith, great trees were sprouting. One wonders if Jesus told these parables as a way to comfort the disciples, to remind them that there is much that is, perhaps thankfully, out of their control: they can do what is given to them, but ultimately, God will give the growth.

Discussion Questions

What are the seeds of faith that God has been calling you to sow? What's stopped you from doing so?