

## **Barre Congregational Church**

June 13, 2021: A Pastoral Message by Pastor Margaret Keyser

~ Fourth Sunday after Pentecost ~

*“When the Lord Speaks of Seeds, Shrubs and Trees...”*

Our services can be found on our website at [www.barrechurch.com](http://www.barrechurch.com) and Facebook page.

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**Scripture Reading: Ezekiel 17 v 22-24 and Mark 4 v 26-34**

### **I. Introduction:**

In many established gardens, we find plants of all kinds; shrubs, small and large for all seasons, with or without flowers, and foliage to match the rest of the garden, and change their color as the seasons continue to transition. New England is known for its abundance of trees. I remember arriving in Connecticut from South Africa in 1998 during the fall, being completely overwhelmed by the beauty of the fall colors, but especially by the richness in trees...trees everywhere, small, medium, and large. Yes, we do have trees in South Africa, but where I lived and grew up, I could not remember being surrounded by so many trees. As I started to garden myself, and got to know various shrubs and trees, I came to appreciate them even more.

### **II. The Great Eagle, the Cedar, and the Vine**

The passage in Ezekiel 17 verses 1-21 takes us into the mind of Yahweh, who instructed the prophet Ezekiel to tell the people of Israel the parable of a Great Eagle with powerful wings, long feathers, and full plumage of varied colors, that came to Lebanon, and broke off the top of a cedar tree, carried it to a land of merchants, and planted it there. The text continues with the Eagle taking seed from the soil of Judah, and planted it in this new land, where it sprouted, and became a low spreading vine. The branches of the vine turned toward the Eagle, but the roots stayed in the ground. It was a fruitful vine, as it grew toward the Eagle. The story goes on to talk about a second great eagle with powerful wings and full plumage. Instead of the roots remaining in the ground, the vine sent the roots as well as the branches out toward this second eagle. The story gets interrupted by the voice of the Lord, asking

whether the second vine will survive, or whether it will be uprooted from where it had been planted? Will it withstand the East wind as it strikes them?

The interpretation of this fable, by Yahweh to Ezekiel in verses 11 – 21 specifies the Great Eagle as the King of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar who went to Jerusalem ten years earlier to carry their king Jehoiachin, the top of the cedar, and his family and all the noble leaders, and brought them back to Babylon in exile. (We must remember that the whole exile of Judah into Babylon was prophesied by Jeremiah, because of their disobedience to Yahweh). Nebuchadnezzar was a generous king, who made sure that Jehoiachin was taken care of, and treated well. Members of the royal family and other leaders were removed, including Ezekiel who became the prophet in the Babylonian Exile. The second eagle was the king Zedekiah, who was made king by the King of Babylon, and enjoyed the generosity of the King of Babylon. Zedekiah pledged the oath to Nebuchadnezzar, but then decided he wanted to be free from the rulership of Nebuchadnezzar and called upon the military leadership of Egypt to help free them. Yahweh is clearly not happy with Zedekiah, who swore an oath to the King of Babylon. Zedekiah's oath to the Babylonian King, according to Daniel Block in his book on Ezekiel, was seen by Yahweh as an important oath to keep, hence the declaration of Yahweh that Zedekiah will die in the land of the King of Babylon who put him on the throne. He broke a political covenant, which in theological terms means to challenge the Divine Guarantor, says Block.

In our verses 22 – 24, Yahweh then goes back to the imagery of the cedar, declaring that the Sovereign Lord will take a shoot from the top of the cedar and plant it, and will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. It will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. And in verse 24 "All the trees of the field will know that I the Lord will bring down the tall tree, which is Zedekiah, and make the low tree grow tall, who is Jehoiachin. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish." Yahweh is also clearly pointing to the Messianic figure who will be written about later on. Yahweh will make everything new! The use of the huge tree offering nourishment and protection for all creatures appears to represent Yahweh's

commitment to be the final protector and blessing to the nations. Also, the Dynasty will survive the exile. God is with them even in exile.

The moral of this story of the cedar tree is that Yahweh takes seriously the issue of covenants and oaths, the commitment to serve and to serve the people well. It also is an indication that Yahweh remains the sovereign Lord of history. The Lord will restore, make things right, heal and make the nations flourish again.

### **III. Jesus and seeds**

Jesus continues in the new dispensation to use the symbols of nature to illustrate His message of the Kingdom of God. In the Gospel of Mark, He talks about the mustard seed which was an exceedingly small seed, how it grows into an exceptionally large plant, and is spoken of as a tree by many. The Kingdom of God, Jesus says is like a mustard seed, which, when it is planted, grows large and it becomes, like the mustard plant or tree, a place of protection, of shade for those who need rest. The Kingdom of God is that space where God is, where God cultivates the environment of community, of togetherness, of goodness, and love and a shared experience of safety and spiritual growth. It is like a cedar, a large shrub, a tree, that grows and gives shade to the ones who need it.

### **IV. Conclusion**

The Lord God is sovereign and will forever be with us and in our lives and on our journeys. The Lord God understands, as in the case with Zedekiah and the people of Israel, our loyalties, and disloyalties, our commitments and lack thereof, our strengths and our weaknesses. The Lord speaks to us as children of God, as members of our church, our families and at our workplaces and in our neighborhoods. Are we seeds that are planted with roots going deeper into the ground, and branches growing toward the greatest of all, Yahweh, God Almighty, or do we sometimes uproot ourselves and send our roots and branches into areas where they wither and die? We are reminded this morning that God is guiding us through the work and presence of the Holy Spirit, to stay on the journey we have been called to be on, to tend to the shrub or the tree that we are, to fertilize and water and to grow strong as Christians and as the church here in Barre. May the voice of God speak to us in ways we will understand and help us on our walk in this earthly spiritual journey. Amen.