

“On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar.”

This is from our reading in Ezekiel. Did you hear it? “From the lofty top of a cedar, I myself will take a sprig and plant it.” There is purpose to this planting – in order that it may produce boughs, that it may bear fruit, that it may become a noble cedar. In other words, that it may flourish.

Ezekiel here, like Jesus in our gospel reading, is giving us a **particular vision of that flourishing**. Jesus calls it the kingdom of God – like a mustard seed that *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. Jesus here echoes Ezekiel, who describes what *becomes* of this sprig planted by the Lord: “Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.” They seem to share this particular vision of the flourishing God intends – it’s flourishing through welcome, through hospitality, through care.

This is a church community deeply invested in the work of welcome and hospitality. We were led by the Spirit to a new and fertile ground where God planted the seeds of this community being made new – we seek to be a place that “every kind of bird can live” and “make nests in its shade”. We communicate this through our welcome: strangers at the door, shared bounty of life together during Coffee Hour, invitation of new quilters and prayer shawl makers, growing involvement in our worship and in each other’s lives.

It’s a particular and new kind of flourishing that we’re “growing into” here in this place. It’s a flourishing that is shaped by, created by, care.

We do very well at care within and without the walls of this church. We have willing volunteers who work hard to help in the variety of roles that enable us to thrive – as a worshiping community, as a good and responsible non-profit entity, and as a community focused on reaching out and positively impacting the community we live in. Truly, in your generosity of effort and all the ways you give of yourselves, we are flourishing. Thanks be to God.

There is a word in these readings though that has been whispering in my ears, interrupting these meditations on flourishing. Like many types of things, flourishing is a hard thing to sustain, even for God. What are we to do with that?

A week ago Saturday, some of us came up here to do a little work on the property. It was an opportunity for me to continue some work I've been doing in the "median land" between these two irrigation ditches. I'm slowly carving a little path from Lower Continental up to the highway. It involves clearing out the many dead branches and bushes that have been taking over in there. I hope that someday we can have an established "urban trail" that leads to the fairgrounds and the dog park – a little wooded walk that weaves through our "some-day memorial garden" and takes them where they're going with a lasting effect. It's taking a lot of work, and requires certain things beyond my ability, but something is emerging, something is becoming.

That "becoming" is the word that's been snagging my mind in these readings. It's the *becoming* described by Ezekiel in the form of this tender, delicate sprig planted by the Lord. It's the becoming described in the Psalm 92: "Those planted in the house of the Lord (good and fertile ground, one day) shall flourish in the courts of our God." And Jesus, without naming this farmer describes this becoming: "The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head."

Here is a story about my own becoming.

Those first two verses of Psalm 92 are special to me – they were the sung words that closed every Christmas Concert at my alma mater, Concordia College. Our last concerts of the season were always at Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis, with a sold out crowd. The Concert Choir, all 80 of us, would take center stage while the other four choirs would process off the stage and into the surrounding hallways – out of sight, out of mind. The orchestra would play the intro and we would sing in unison Compline: It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praise to your name, O Most High; to herald your love in the morning, your truth at the close of the day. And then from the hallways, just within hearing, you'd hear 'Amen', and we echoed in harmony – 'Amen' – the lights fading to black and blessed silence.

Those were the days when the church for me held nothing but a memory and a shame I'd left behind. But that moment, and many such moments in that choir, planted me firmly in what would not let me go. It watered my roots and gave me a sense of presence. Brad Roth used the words I borrow here – "God's rooting presence." (Roth 6.10.2024 CC)

I tell you that story because it took another fifteen years for me to step into the ministry into which God was calling me. I had a lot of *becoming* to do, apparently. The question is for today, "What does *becoming* have to do with Messiah's flourishing?"

Messiah Lutheran is flourishing now. But when that flourishing fades as all flourishing does, what will become of us? What is God calling us to become now, in this flourish of summer?

Part of my role as pastor is (guided by the Spirit) to help you in your becoming – even in the midst of flourishing. I am looking at your future and I'm seeing, among other things, a particular reality and a particular possibility for what I believe God is calling us to become (- a community rooted in the care of one another.)

The reality. In the next ten years, many of us will be dead and gone. We have had a taste of this kind of loss in the last six months with the deaths of Andrea Holmen and Allen Hanson, among others. Jesus helps us to look at reality honestly, and Luther tells us to call a thing what it is. It's painful. But the question is, what is to be done in the face of this reality? I think that we, though differently, can flourish.

That flourishing will take, first, an acknowledgement that ours is a faith that is aimed squarely at the helplessness and hopelessness that death brings.

“Where O death is your sting, where is your victory?” We believe death has been swallowed up in the victory of Jesus. Though we die, we are made alive in Christ, able to live unafraid of its grasp. This is flourishing rooted not in our average Sunday attendance, but in the waters of baptism.

Second, it will take courage.

I was speaking to a pastor a few weeks ago who had a parishioner that caught covid. This was an older member, and he quickly lost the ability to get out of bed. The pastor got him to the hospital, stayed all night, and arranged to get this member's laundry done. My thoughts for this pastor were first, “That's not your job!” Then my thoughts turned to you, Messiah, who was without a pastor for 10 months prior to my arrival. I did not save the day – you figured it out. But this is a reality you may see again – a reality that many churches in our synod live in today, weeks and months and some | year after year.

The care we practice today, is the shape our flourishing will take tomorrow. I am confident that you will not lose sight of the need outside these walls, but we learn that care by attending to the need inside these walls: Need for connection, for purpose; need for a break; need for laundry or dishes; need for laughter, lightness and joy; need for unburdening, sharing the load; need for communion, for peace. The reality of Jesus' death is that God is there, at the place of our need to be encountered and met with.

So how do we make our care of each other part of the fabric of this community – a steady, reliable way that we are church together? We prepare for a time when the casual caring of a few is no longer enough.

I have a vision of a small group of dedicated members of this community who feel the call to attend to this community. Each with a call list, each with a willingness to reach out to members, each with a sense of desire to know what care people need. This would be a group working on behalf of Messiah, organizing others in the care of each other. This is a group that would deepen and allow for rooted flourishing, even in the midst of loss, need, and death. For this would be a rooting practice of “faith forming faith.” After all, “The love of Christ urges us on so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them...”, the one to be found where needs are felt and met.

This is a vision of the kin-dom God intends. Unbridled care, regardless of party affiliation, race, class, gender identity, ability, sexuality, or otherwise. Unbridled but intentional and organized. Care of physical needs, emotional connection, and attending to the identity that pushes all others aside – that of God’s beloved children, for that is what we are.

When that day comes, the flourishing of today wains, and death creeps closer, we know that to be in Christ, we are ever a new creation – a creation in which the old still bear fruit, green and succulent, a creation of deep, rooted flourishing in which everything has become new.

AMEN