

Father's Day, June 16<sup>th</sup>

Sermon Title: A Noble Cedar

Scripture: Ezekiel 17:22-24

Theme: The nobility of fatherhood, encouraging, comforting, and challenging as a parent

“I [the Lord] will take a sprig from the lofty top (*tsammereth* – tree top, fleeciness) of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender (*rak* – frail, soft) one from the topmost (*rosh*: head) of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel, I will plant (*shathal*: to transplant) it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit and become a noble (*addir*: majestic, goodly) cedar.”

It was a competition for the ages: King Hezekiah of Jerusalem against King Sennacherib of Assyria. The Assyrian King and his army had captured the other cities of Judah despite all their imposing defenses. Now, the ultimate showdown on the highway to the Fuller's Field. Jerusalem had the best fortifications of all the cities of Judah; Sennacherib had saved the best for last. Pharaoh cannot help you now. All their chariots and horsemen cannot make it in time to help you. Hezekiah is deceiving you when he says that your God will rise to your defense. Do not listen to Hezekiah. Come join the Assyrians instead. I, Sennacherib, will give you 2,000 horses if you are able to set riders on them. I will take you away to a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards and you can worship the Assyrian gods instead. Do not listen to Hezekiah; make peace with me instead and come out to join us. If you do, then everyone will eat from their own vine and their own fig tree, and drink water from their own well (Is. 36:16). These were the words, the promises, of Sennacherib, to divide the people and set them against Hezekiah, and against the Lord God. Make peace with your conquerors and all these things will be yours. Yeah, right! We have all heard those words before. All you have to do is reject the Lord who has protected you for your entire life, day by day. All you have to do is reject your legacy and turn over your security to someone else. I'll take care of the rest.

In the ancient world, the height of security was to be able to eat from your own vine, from your own fig tree, and drink water from your own well. Under these conditions, the idea was that no one could frighten you (Mic. 4:4). Under these conditions, you would be self-reliant, self-sustaining, and self-sufficient. Under these conditions, Israel and Judah lived in peace for many years (1 Kgs. 4:25). But these conditions are not enough for peace to prevail.

Zechariah adds something to these conditions, an extension of their core that will add the prospect of peace: that when the Day of the Lord comes, when the promised Messiah, the Branch, arrives, the guilt of the land will be removed in a single day, and each person will then invite their neighbor to sit under their vine and fig tree (Zech. 3:10). There will be room for all. When there is room for all, peace will come, guilt will be removed, forgiveness will be the hallmark of the day. Our Savior gives us a parable to hold this promise: “The kin[g]dom of heaven is like a mustard seed which someone took and sowed in the field . . . the seed is smaller than all other seeds, but when it was full grown it is larger than other garden plants, and it becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches (Matt. 13:31-32). Small

steps to peace become large steps and larger steps toward a time of peace.

Amanda Gorman, America's youth poet laureate, writes: 'Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true: That even as we grieved, we grew; that even as we hurt, we hoped; that even as we tired, we tried; that we'll forever be tied together, victorious; not because we will never again know defeat but because we will never again sow division; Scripture tells us to envision that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree; and no one shall make them afraid; if we're to live up to our own time then victory won't lie in the blade but in all the bridges we've made; that is the promised glade; the hill we climb; if only we dare.'

"On the mountain height of Israel, I will transplant the top of a cedar tree, the fleeci-est part of the tree, and it will produce boughs and bear fruit and become a noble tree. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind." (Ez. 17:23).

Today's scripture from Ezekiel is sometimes referred to as the Allegory of the Messianic Tree. The noble cedar in the allegory implies that a mighty ruler will soon be born, a Messiah King, one who will rule well over the nations, so that they will come and worship the noble vine, the noble tree (Micah 4:1-4) transplanted to Jerusalem. Luke's genealogy of Jesus uses this allegory to trace our Savior's birth from Zerubbabel (Lk 3:27), whose name means "Sprout of Babylon," a King in captivity, and one whom many had hoped would restore the Davidic monarchy. It is noteworthy that this Messiah was compared to a cedar. Solomon's palace was built with the cedars of Lebanon and it was called the "House of the Forest of Lebanon". And so also, the Temple was built of Lebanon cedars: "all was cedar; no stone was seen." (1 Kgs 6:8, 7:2). The cedar of Lebanon was the best of the best cedars, strong and sturdy. In this regard, you may remember that the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, the one that burned to the ground in 2019, had been built from the medieval forests of Germany. These buildings symbolized the primacy of strength because they are built from cedar, a word that means "strength." They do not symbolize human strength, but divine strength.

Ezekiel lays out the strength of the noble cedar: "All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord. I bring the high tree low and the low tree high; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. If the Lord speaks it, it will happen."

Daniel conveys the same idea in his writings: "You will only retain your prosperity (your strength), to the extent that you show mercy to the poor (Dan 4:27)." Any strength we might show, or any power we might have, is built directly on our compassion. When the Day of the Lord arrives, outlying nations from the north, south, east, west will come to worship at the altar of compassion and mercy, not domination or brutality. Their strength will not be found in suspicion and the lack of hospitality. Their strength shall not be found in the spoils of war or the peace that depends on guarding the spoils of war. Rather, their strength will be found in their love and in their outreach, and in human forgiveness and acceptance, one for the other. Ezekiel calls out to us, in the name of the Messiah to come: 'Get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!' (Ez. 18:31). Nurture the noble vine, the noble cedar in good soil and abundant waters; the

One called The Branch, the Messiah, will nurture you and me under its foliage, its canopy, its wings.

Psalm 92:12-14

The righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the Lord; they flourish in the courts of our God. In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap,

Today we are celebrating those who are fathering, those who have fathered, of whatever gender you are. Today we say: You are noble! You are strong. You are the heart of compassion. We need you! You are like the noble cedar or the noble palm! We pray that you will flourish and continue to produce good fruit for you families, for your community.

I have pointed out in the past how the Apostle Paul referred to himself as one giving birth, a mother going through the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in us, specifically he uses this image with the Galatian congregation. (Gal. 4:19) Of course, this is not the only metaphor he uses; he also refers to himself as a “father,” specifically with the congregation in Thessalonika. (1 Thess. 2:11-12).

“As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, We **encouraged** you and **comforted** you as we **urged** you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kin[g]dom and glory.

He treats each one as if he were their father, calling them to come near for a hug, or to sit beside him to be comforted with soothing speech, or laying out a plan for doing good works in the neighborhood (Eph. 2:10). The Apostle Paul summarizes his ministry as a “coming alongside.” (1 Thess. 2:11-12.) Like a father, we come alongside (Grk: *parakaleo*) to encourage you, to tell again the stories (Grk: *paramytheomai*) of faith that comfort us, and to affirm (Grk: *martyromai*) our identity and journey. This is consistent with the ministry of Jesus. Whether Jesus is speaking in parables (ἐν παραβολαῖς) [Matt. 13:3] or in proverbs (ἐν παροιμίαις) [John 16:25], Jesus is preparing the soil of our minds and hearts to receive words of grace and justice, and, in a certain figurative sense, through these common stories and sayings, is walking alongside us and thinking alongside us in the way we have come to identify as ‘Emmaus.’ If the teaching is effective (i.e. heard), we learn to think as Jesus would think or act as Jesus would act.

In the past, some scholars have told us that, while mother’s love is unconditional, a father’s love helps us deal with conditionality. This narrative from the past informs us that a father’s love helps us cope with times of affliction, when we run up against our limits, or when we feel ‘hemmed in,’ or backed into a corner with no way out. A father’s love helps us develop a passionate patience, says Eugene Peterson in *The Message*, which in turn forges a tempered steel of virtue (a quality of *provedness*), keeping us alert to what God will do next in our lives. This narrative from the past tells us that a father’s love lifts us up erasing all shame and doubt. It informs us that a father’s love de-confuses us and makes our situation crystal clear. It provides us

a way to think and a way to act, in whatever situation we find ourselves.

However, I think the psychology has changed considerably for us today, blurring the boundary lines between motherly and fatherly love. Our social roles have been blended and merged; new parenting challenges have emerged, multi-ethnic, multi-generational, multi-racial, crossing boundaries.

“As a father has compassion (Heb. *racham*, tender love or mercy) for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear (Heb. *yare*, reverent fear, morally respectful) him.” (Ps. 103:13).

The word ‘compassion’ (*racham*) in this verse, implies ‘a tender love’ for the fetus in the womb, for the child as it approaches childbirth, and then afterwards as well. Our compassion as fathers and mothers is based on this type of tender love. The overwhelming joy we feel as expecting parents, at the event of childbirth, and during the early years of parenting, is part and parcel of that tender love. A tender love swallowed up in joy! In surprise and excitement. As God has the joyful and tender love for us, so we are called to do the same with our children and families and beyond.

One of the lasting biblical images of fatherhood is described in Hosea 11:4, God is speaking through the words of the prophet Hosea: “Like a loving father, I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them.” The context for Hosea is another scripture from Deuteronomy, “like a father, the Lord your God goes before you, the one who will fight for you, just as He did for you in Egypt before your very eyes, and in the wilderness, where you saw how the Lord your God carried you, just as one carries a child, all the way that you have traveled until you reached this place.” (Deut. 1:29-31).

Our compassion for foster children is based on this type of tender love as well. As I understand the scriptures, and the original language of the scriptures, it is a religious duty to have a viable plan, financially and physically, to take care of our foster children. The Hebrew verb *aman*, often translated “to believe” in God, is also used when referring to foster fathers, in the sense “to foster” a child. To foster children is to be a steward of their time, filling the hollows, the empty places, with substance. To be fostered (Heb. *aman*) as a child is to be built up in trust and faithfulness through love. In the First Testament, this love embraces what it means to believe, that we foster the love of God in our families. Through the Spirit of God’s Son, we are embraced in a family defined by God’s love. If you are a foster child, it is very special when a family offers to be your “forever family,” and you, as the child, respond with the same choice. Sadly, too many children do not get such offers or only get temporary offers. The dynamic process of forming a family is never easy, but it is always life-changing to choose and to be chosen.

As the heavens are high above the earth, as far as the east is from the west, or the north is from the south, so great is God’s steady love for us. I like to call these descriptions the quantum

measurements of forgiveness in modern terms. The measurements are not absolute but relative to each other. We cannot talk about them in any limited way; they express infinity in poetic terms. They define relationship with God as the contextual model for understanding, well beyond any static measurements. In like manner, a father's compassion, a father's tender mercy, is beyond static measurements. It cannot be measured by the number of 'teddy bears' or 'soft stuffed animals' on the bed. It cannot be measured by the number of childhood events that a father has missed attending. As in other life measurements, quality time is better than quantity time. Yes, fathers, to some degree, you can pay it forward by walking the baby in the middle of the night or changing the diaper on a regular basis. But in general, life cannot be measured by inches or hours or trust funds. On the other hand, it can be measured immensely for each time a father says, 'I love you, daughter or son!' even if it is far too late in saying it, or even if it is a makeup for not saying it more often. And precisely because God is not a fair-weather God, we cannot be fair-weather fathers. We must be present for our children 'come rain or come shine,' in sickness or in health, in the cold of winter or the warmth of summer, in the fiercest storms or the most pleasant of Sundays.

*Your Spirit: A tribute to my father* by Tram-Tiara von Reichenbach

"I hear your words of wisdom and will remember what you taught me so well that without rain, trees cannot grow, without rain, flowers cannot bloom, without life's challenges, I cannot grow strong, when I think of mountains, their majesty and magnificence, I will think of your courage for your country. No matter where I am, your spirit will be beside me."

*A Father* by Ellen Bailey

"Protector of a youthful heart, consoler of all pains, a hero in the eyes of love, the blood within your veins, child love your father now, give him all your praise, our time in life is limited, wisely use these days."

Alleluia! Amen.

