

06.09.24 ~ Pentecost 3
“Natural & Supernatural Beauty”
The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Ezekiel 17:1-10, 12b, 18, 22-24 (NLT)

¹ Then this message came to me from the Lord: ²“Son of man, give this riddle, and tell this story to the people of Israel. ³ Give them this message from the Sovereign Lord:

“A great eagle with broad wings and long feathers,
covered with many-colored plumage,
came to Lebanon.

He seized the top of a cedar tree

⁴ and plucked off its highest branch.

He carried it away to a city filled with merchants.

He planted it in a city of traders.

⁵ He also took a seedling from the land
and planted it in fertile soil.

He placed it beside a broad river,
where it could grow like a willow tree.

⁶ It took root there and
grew into a low, spreading vine.

Its branches turned up toward the eagle,
and its roots grew down into the ground.

It produced strong branches
and put out shoots.

⁷ But then another great eagle came
with broad wings and full plumage.

So the vine now sent its roots and branches
toward him for water,

⁸ even though it was already planted in good soil
and had plenty of water

so it could grow into a splendid vine
and produce rich leaves and luscious fruit.

⁹ “So now the Sovereign Lord asks:

Will this vine grow and prosper?

No! I will pull it up, roots and all!

I will cut off its fruit

and let its leaves wither and die.

I will pull it up easily

without a strong arm or a large army.

¹⁰ But when the vine is transplanted,
will it thrive?

No, it will wither away

when the east wind blows against it.

It will die in the same good soil
where it had grown so well.”

^{12b} The king of Babylon came to Jerusalem, took away her king and princes, and brought them to Babylon.

¹⁸ For the king of Israel disregarded his treaty and broke it after swearing to obey; therefore, he will not escape.

²² “This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will take a branch from the top of a tall cedar, and I will plant it on the top of Israel’s highest mountain. ²³ It will become a majestic cedar, sending forth its branches and producing seed. Birds of every sort will nest in it, finding shelter in the shade of its branches. ²⁴ And all the trees will know that it is I, the Lord, who cuts the tall tree down and makes the short tree grow tall. It is I who makes the green tree wither and gives the dead tree new life. I, the Lord, have spoken, and I will do what I said!”

Leader: These Are God’s Words of Instruction.

All: Thanks be to God!

Matthew 24:30-36 (NLT)

³⁰ And then at last, the sign that the Son of Man is coming will appear in the heavens, and there will be deep mourning among all the peoples of the earth. And they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. ³¹ And he will send out his angels with the mighty blast of a trumpet, and they will gather his chosen ones from all over the world—from the farthest ends of the earth and heaven.

³² “Now learn a lesson from the fig tree. When its branches bud and its leaves begin to sprout, you know that summer is near. ³³ In the same way, when you see all these things, you can know his return is very near, right at the door. ³⁴ I tell you the truth, this generation will not pass from the scene until all these things take place. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will disappear, but my words will never disappear.

³⁶ “However, no one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows.

Leader: These Are Christ’s Imaginative Images.

All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Creator God, we thank you for beauty in our natural surroundings as well as in the supernatural workings of God. We thank you too for words of imagination and metaphor that help us to understand your vision and assurances. We are reminded by these passages that you sent Jesus to be our eternal guide and he will come again. Please open our hearts and minds to the beauty of creation and humankind as well as a better understanding of your supernatural power, mercy, and forgiveness. May the Holy Spirit be felt by all today as is your voice heard today through this messenger. Amen.

As you heard and perhaps read the words to the choral offering, I hope you remembered that the same words in Philippians 4:8-9 are our theme for 2024: “Finding Beauty.” In January, we began pondering where we find beauty. Can you believe it is June already? I posted a funny Facebook quote: “I’m not exactly sure how we are six months in to a year that only started two weeks ago.” And it has received a lot of agreement! I am happy with how much we have done so far as a church and Missions Center, but June always feels like a re-boot or reminder that time flies! Another reflection point is that the world has experienced a lot of grief, disaster, and conflict as have individuals. We do have a choice whether to focus on the difficult challenges of the year or to keep our eyes on Jesus and the beauty of God’s creation, or to think about things that lift us up toward God, his spirit, and eternal life. Those are the questions for your 6-month reflection today. And those are the questions that come up as you re-read the Scriptures from today’s service.

I chose these verses for their language and word pictures as the seasons are changing again (into summer), the flowers are blooming in bright colors, the grass is growing, vacations are being planned or taken, and the sun is mostly shining. Before the hot humidity and mosquitos overwhelm us like they do in July and August, we have a chance to enjoy ourselves on the deck or porch, a perfect place to “think on these things” that are noble, beautiful, and true, rather than the things we personally cannot change in the world; natural disasters, poverty, disease and other things that break our hearts. It does not mean those things do not exist, for they are the flawed human condition. But we have a choice. So let us

admire the tall cedars of Lebanon, the blue skies of Annandale, and look forward to Christ's return.

Until then, let's study our Bible and the first passage. Ezekiel was chosen by God to present a prophecy in the form of a riddle to the people. So, although I love the beauty it conjures up in my mind, there is a political and strategic message for the people, and for us. Think of this as an allegory illustrating God's sovereignty, consequences of disobedience, and the divine promise of restoration. The first eagle is the warrior King of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar II. His reference to Lebanon is cryptically Jerusalem. Then the second eagle represents the King of Egypt. The first king, I mean, eagle, clipped the top of the cedar tree and replanted the bough in a city known for trade. This refers to the military takeover of Jerusalem and the captivity to Babylon. The eagle transplanted the shoot; or Israel was captured and moved to Babylon. You may wish to go back to read more of your Bible history in 1 and 2 Kings or Chronicles.

The first eagle, or King Nebuchadnezzar did not totally destroy them (or in our story, the tree), because he planted seed and another bough from that Lebanon cedar (i.e., Jerusalem) near abundant water, and he fertilized it compassionately. He had tapped Zedekiah to take over as a puppet king of Babylon, and though he stayed loyal at first he strayed.

There was a second bigger eagle, the Egyptian Pharaoh King Necho. He tried to entice the vine to a new location and caused rebellion against Babylon. That caused Zedekiah's allegiances to falter, thinking Egypt could help them, but Nebuchadnezzar wanted it his way and did not spare the city. This prophecy came three years before it all happened.

God's judgment would come down on Zedekiah because he eventually broke his oath to the king. He was killed in Babylon (2 Kings 24:5-7).

Israel longed for security and prosperity, but neither Babylon nor Egypt could provide it. Further reading of the prophecy assures us that **God** would take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it. In this case, the shoot was from the Davidic genealogy. God would replant a king from the line of David on the mountain heights (holy Mt. Zion), and we know this king as Jesus, our Messiah. This kingdom would sprout branches and bear fruit to become a splendid cedar. Birds will rest in it (like the mustard seed plant Jesus told about last week). But God's real purpose in restoring Israel was to reveal His glory. The fulfillment did not actually happen (remember this is prophecy!) and will not happen until Christ returns. Ezekiel's allegories were shared for information, beauty, conviction, yet also as subtle instruction.

This prophecy leads us into the second reading's supernatural beauty of God's actions and Jesus' message, even if we do not understand it fully. We can still believe as we wait for Christ's Second Coming. These are not meant to be apocalyptic frightening examples; Jesus through Matthew is explaining the obvious signs, but the disciples do not get it and seem to have no leadership to continue his work after he's gone. The Matthew passage instructs the followers of Jesus (and us) to **not** be alarmed at tribulations, wars, and disasters. These are simply part of ongoing history and in themselves do **not** indicate that the end is near. Only God knows the date and time of Christ's return. Disciples are to remain faithful to Christ in the midst of tribulations and persecutions,

knowing that only those who endure will receive eternal salvation when Christ returns.

Disciples must be sure they are ready at all times for Christ's return. This is where the fig tree example comes in; summer is near when you see the fruit. There were signs then as now: false teachers, false doctrine, greed, immorality, delusion, trust in humankind's powers rather than God's, war, atrocities, pestilence, earthquakes, and more. Jesus says to focus not on catastrophe, but on the good around you. Think about the things of Christ and call on him for comfort in times of worry. Stress will give you dis-ease. We always have difficult challenges to overcome with God's help. That is living! We should give thanks that we are not living in the days of Ezekiel. As was said last week, have hope and faith that God is providing the yeast and leaven to spread his mission within this community called Annandale; it is our duty to think on good things and continue the work any way we can!

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, fill your minds with *beauty and truth*. Meditate on whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is good, whatever is virtuous and praiseworthy. ⁹ Keep to the script: whatever you learned and received and heard and saw in me—do it—and the God of peace will walk with you. Amen!

Let us pray. Dear Lord, we thank you today for these stories; help us understand. Help us to remember you sent your son for our benefit and he will return to us one day. We must be firm in our faith and belief against the obstacles of life and death, war, and peace. Help us to show others the natural beauty of our world and the supernatural beauty and strength of being a Christ-follower. We ask you to strengthen us and bless us as we ponder your words and fellowship with one another. Thank you, Jesus, for it is in your name we pray, **Amen.**