

Introduction

The mustard seed becomes a great shrub that shelters the birds, recalling ancient images of the tree of life. We'd expect a cedar or a sequoia, but Jesus finds the power of God better imaged in a tiny, no-account seed. It's not the way we expect divine activity to look. Yet the tree of life is here, in the cross around which we gather, the tree into which we are grafted through baptism, the true vine that nourishes us with its fruit in the cup we share. It may not appear all that impressive, but while nobody's looking it grows with a power beyond our understanding.

Prayer of the Day

O God, you are the tree of life, offering shelter to all the world. Graft us into yourself and nurture our growth, that we may bear your truth and love to those in need, through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. **Amen.**

First Reading: 1 Samuel 15:34--16:13

Saul, anointed by the prophet Samuel as the first king of Israel, displeases the LORD. The LORD therefore sends Samuel to Bethlehem, where he anoints David, the youngest of the sons of Jesse, to succeed Saul as king.

³⁴Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul. ³⁵Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.

^{16:1}The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons." ²Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the LORD said, "Take a heifer with you, and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.'" ³Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you." ⁴Samuel did what the LORD commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, "Do you come peaceably?" ⁵He said, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

⁶When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed is now before the LORD." ⁷But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the

height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”⁸ Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.”⁹ Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.”¹⁰ Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, “The LORD has not chosen any of these.”¹¹ Samuel said to Jesse, “Are all your sons here?” And he said, “There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.”¹² He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, “Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.”¹³ Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

Psalm 20

¹May the LORD answer you in the | day of trouble,
the name of the God of Ja- | cob defend you;

²**send you help from the | sanctuary
and strengthen you | out of Zion;**

³may the LORD remember | all your offerings
and accept | your burnt sacrifice;

⁴**grant you your | heart's desire
and prosper | all your plans.**

⁵We will shout for joy at your victory and unfurl our banners in the name | of our God;
may the LORD grant all | your requests.

⁶**Now I know that the LORD gives victory to | the anointed one;
God will answer out of the holy heaven, gaining victory with a | strong right hand.**

⁷Some trust in chariots and | some in horses,
but we rely on the name of the | LORD our God.

⁸**They collapse | and fall down,
but we will arise | and stand upright.**

⁹O LORD, give victory | to the king
and answer us | when we call.

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

Paul encourages believers to live by faith and not by sight. We do not consider Jesus from a human perspective but through the eyes of faith, believing he died for all and was raised. All who are in Christ are now in God's new creation.

⁶So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord—⁷for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. ¹⁰For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

[¹¹Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences. ¹²We 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. ¹³For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.] ¹⁴For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

¹⁶From 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 know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

Gospel Reading: Mark 4:26-34

Jesus frequently uses parables to teach ordinary people as they are able to hear and understand. Images of sowing and growing show the vitality of God's kingdom.

²⁶[Jesus] 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. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

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

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

Prayers of Intercession

Let us come before the triune God in prayer, saying “God, in your mercy,” and responding, “hear our prayer.”

A brief silence.

Holy God, you plant the seeds of faith in every nation. Enliven your church, so that the good news of your grace may root and grow throughout the world. God, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Creator, even the trees, shrubs, and flowers delight in your goodness. From the depths of the soil to the highest mountain, bring forth new plants. Restore growth to places suffering drought. God, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Judge of nations, we pray for our leaders and those in power. Grant them the ability to regard those under their charge with humility, dedicating their lives in service to others. God, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Divine comforter, you show compassion to those in need and provide relief to those who call on you. Bless all who suffer, especially people trapped in cycles of poverty and homelessness. God, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Sovereign God, this house of worship belongs to you. We give thanks and pray for our church musician(s) (*especially*). We dedicate to you the joyful noise that comes from this place; the cries of children, the melody of voice and instruments, and the songs from our hearts. God, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Eternal God, we give thanks for our ancestors in the faith who are now at home with you (*especially*). We look forward to that day when we are reunited in your new creation. God, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We lift our prayers to you, O God, trusting in your abiding grace.

Amen.

A reflection for the Third Sunday after Pentecost...

The Mystery of Growth

In elementary school, when children learn about plants they inevitably plant a small seed in a clear plastic cup and watch it grow. This helps as they learn the parts of plants: leaf, stem, roots. As we get older we get more sophisticated in our ability to explain the details of the plant and the growth we see, but on some level the growth itself remains a mystery. Why do some plants thrive and others fail? Was it the soil? Too much water? Too little? And what of those plants growing in the tiny cracks in between slabs of concrete?

The growth of faith is a similar mystery. We can do the best we can to provide good soil, in the form of teachers and mentors, parents and pastors. Still, the faith seems to take root and grow in some people and not in others. And then there are people raised in the worst conditions who grow to be strong people of faith.

Jesus reminds us that faith is a gift which comes to us from God. We cannot control it in ourselves, and we cannot control it in others. We can plant, we can water, and then we can sleep and wake until the plant grows. In the end it is God who brings the growth and the Holy Spirit who gives us faith. As people of God we are called to be good soil. As people of God we are called to trust that God will do what we cannot. Faith will grow, and the church will flourish, not because of our grand schemes and plans, but because God will have it no other way.

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