

"What Tree Will We Be"

It's gone down in broadcast history as one of the goofiest questions an interviewer has ever asked a famous person. Speaking of history, this goes back a way. Barbara Walters, now retired but known for her Barbara Walters Specials, interviews that brought her close up and personal with important people, was talking with legendary actress Katherine Hepburn. The year was 1981. Hepburn, well up in age at the time, shared in the interview that even at her advanced age she felt strong, "like a tree." Walters, ever the consummate reporter, pushed deeper and posed the question she has never lived down. She asked the great actress, "What kind of tree would you be?" There was an uncomfortable pause in the interview but Katherine Hepburn barely dropped a beat as she answered, "I wouldn't want to be an elm tree and get Dutch elm disease. I would like to be an oak," Hepburn said, "strong and beautiful." Now granted, this may not be the best of interview questions but I'm not sure Barbara Walters deserves the grief she has received because of it. In fact, I'm asking the question this morning, "What kind of tree will we be?" The context for the question isn't a celebrity interview from decades ago. We're asking the question because of the great prophet, Ezekiel. Ezekiel, who brought the truth of God's word long ago in the midst of the Babylonian Exile. The Exile was one of the darkest periods in Hebrew history. Pulled from their homeland, sent into captivity, God's people suffered under the hand of Babylonian control. To a broken and hopeless people, Ezekiel told a story about a tree. This story isn't about an elm tree or even an oak tree. Ezekiel tells of a mighty cedar, a cedar tree grown from the smallest of twigs and planted on the top of the highest mountain. This tender sprig is nurtured by God, strengthened in God's light, and grows strong and mighty, providing shade and safety for God's purpose in the world. Let's get right to it this morning. The real question isn't "What kind of tree will we be?" but "What kind of life will we live?" Do we acknowledge that our lives are held in God's hands? Do we realize that the life we are given is planted by God, nourished by God's love and bathed in the light of God's grace? Do we trust that even what seems most insignificant and small in our lives when tended to by God becomes full of meaning and purpose? The image the prophet gives us is a tree but the reality is our lives. Ezekiel makes it clear that God grows the tree because he wants us to know that God grows our life in faith, too. This isn't my word. Listen to the prophet. It's the voice of God that says, "I the Lord have spoken; I will accomplish it." (eze. 17:24) Our hope grows strong because of what God can do.

In case you'd like to know the complete tree story from Ezekiel it is found by reading all of chapter 17 not just the verses we've heard this morning. I invite you to read the chapter sometime this week. If you do, please know Ezekiel rarely pulls his punches. The prophet is known for bringing a word of judgement to Israel and in chapter 17 he does exactly this. His story begins with the planting of other trees. Ezekiel draws the contrast between a tree that depends on God's power and trees that rely on worldly power. If you read the chapter to get the entire tree story it may be a bit confusing. Let's remember, Ezekiel isn't really a storyteller, he's a prophet. He is concerned about the historical and political realities of his day and that context is complicated. And so, let's simplify the message for our purpose today. Again, it was the time of Exile. Life was extremely hard. In response, the leaders of the Hebrews made alliances with their oppressors. The Hebrew leadership wanted to strengthen its own position and secure its own future. I'll step to the side for a moment to reflect on what's happening in our world. Last week's summit between our president and the leader of North Korea has focused the attention of the world. Everyone wonders if the day of meetings will bring results. Some say, "We've been down this road before. Nothing will change." Others say, "It's a significant achievement to open communication. Anything that lessens the threat of nuclear attack is a good thing." So, we know first hand that agreements between leaders matter. The ancient world was no different. The Hebrew leaders sought alliances with those who threatened them. They wanted an easier life. This sounds reasonable, except Ezekiel questions the motivation. His prophetic eye saw that the compromises being made tossed aside the covenant life God established with the people. This is the judgement, of course. The easier way is not always the faithful way. In the world of the bible looking out for one's self is rarely the appropriate point of view. And so in his story, Ezekiel makes clear that self-planted trees, trees that are only self-tended and self-nourished, trees that don't depend upon God, have no chance for deep roots. This is the prophetic judgement. Self-dependent trees ultimately have no hope for a strong and fruitful life. The story is about a tree but the reality is about our lives. Whether it be the Hebrew kings of old or us and the decisions we make, a faithful life is a God-centered life. To trust only in our ability to grow and nurture life brings us up short. By contrast, the deep roots of faith are always God's work in us. Small things in us grow to significance when nurtured in the hands of God. Even when our faith feels puny, God can make something of it. Even when our trust is shaky, God replants us in solid ground. God takes just a twig of trust and when planted in the rich ground of God's love and grace makes something meaningful come to life.

Last fall Kelly and I purchased three, small flowering trees from a local nursery. We added them to our backyard landscape with the hope of bringing a little color to our world. This spring, when things began to grow, two of the trees came on fine but the third looked dead as a doornail. There was a warranty on the tree so we contacted the nursery. They said they need proof the tree didn't survive. They want a picture and we're to bring in a twig of the tree so they can verify it's truly gone. We'll comply with what they ask, of course, but I know by what I see that the tree is beyond hope. I'm no tree expert but I know it's gone. It's that way in our lives sometimes. We may not be an expert when it comes to God related things and we feel we lack experience when it comes to matters of faith and the Christian life but we are usually very clear when our faith is drying up or losing its life. Sometimes even a casual look tells the story.

The judgement of Ezekiel is hard to hear but remember where his story goes. God takes a sprig from those dried up and shallow rooted trees and plants it high on a mountain. God's tends that fragile twig and the result is marvelous. There may be no hope for the little tree in my backyard but we must never say that about ourselves. Just a twig of trust, just a sprig of spirit, just the tiniest seed of faith, when planted and cared for by God becomes a living canopy for God's purpose in our lives and in our world.

So, what kind of tree will you be? What kind of life will you live? A couple of weeks ago United Methodists from around the West Ohio area gathered for our Annual Conference. Our gathering provided both guidance and inspiration for the work of the church in the world. The theme was "Be Not Afraid - There Is Enough." Throughout our time together a number of people shared their witness of how God is working in their lives. One of those persons was Tammy Reese, a recovering addict. When our lives are held in God's hands tremendous results are possible. Let's hear a brief portion of Tammy's witness as we open ourselves to what God is doing in us.

[copy and paste this link to view video]

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Sx96x6hb5le5ZDhBZMzdbXnslXwUcU2x/view?usp=sharing>

Tammy's message is, "God is enough." She is a child of God. Ezekiel wants us to know how true that is. It's true, God is enough. In fact, God is everything. Like Tammy, we are children of God. Our lives, like trees planted by God and nurtured in God's light of love, are strengthened in this faith. It's a faith we share with others. Church, we are the strong cedars of faith God intends. Take hold of that faith today and this week share this faith with someone in your life who needs the assurance of this truth.