

Rev. Dan Welch Pentecost 4 6-17-18

Text- Ezekiel 17: 22-24

One week from now eighteen youth and four of us adults from First Lutheran will be right there: (Show pictures). (Slide 1) I am really looking forward to getting back out there in the beautiful mountains of northern Idaho surrounded by all the evergreen trees. (Slide 2 -A cabin we stayed in.) By the way, the camp where we are going is located about 50 miles from where my Grandparents lived and where our family would go on vacation when I was growing up. (Slide 3- group picture) I am so happy that for the second year in a row now we have a group of youth going to experience this same amazing part of God's creation, while also doing some hard work (Slide 4- group of us working at a house) to help out those who are less fortunate, and all the while growing together in our faith in Christ through Bible study, worship (Slide 5- worship at the riverside), and fellowship. (sermon slide: all the trees...)

Our Old Testament lesson assigned for today just so happens to talk quite a bit about mountains and trees, including cedar trees, not too unlike the ones in Idaho! Also speaking of trees, have **you** ever seen an apple tree -around here- in late Spring? The lush green leaves and beautiful blossoms sure are a sight to see. A few more months and a harvest of delicious fruit will arrive. Let me ask another question: Have you ever

seen a **Christmas tree** in late Spring, one that's left over from the winter before? That's **not** a pretty sight to see, the needles are gone. All that's left is a dry, skinny trunk and a few brittle, spindly branches. It's hard to believe it once was so beautiful and brought so much joy into a house.

Those are two very different kinds of trees—one green and promising, the other brown and long overdue for the burn pile or a trip to the compost site. One alive, the other dead. Different trees with different expectations. You know which one is going to bear fruit in the Fall. Not only is that dried-up Christmas tree dead, but blue spruces and Scotch pines never bear fruit in the first place!

Now, if you came back in late September or early October, you'd be in for a big surprise if you found the blossoming apple tree had been struck by lightning, cut down, and thrown on the burn pile. You'd be even more surprised to find that dry and brittle pine tree not only planted and green but full of lush, juicy apples! As unbelievable as it sounds, **that's** that kind of amazing and unexpected reversal God is talking about in our Old Testament reading today. Here's what He says in verse 24: "I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the LORD; I have

spoken, and I will do it.” To put it another way, “God Does What He Wants, Whatever He Wants”. You can’t stop it, you can’t control it, you can’t even predict it.

God certainly did what He wanted back in Ezekiel’s day. About 600 years before Christ was born, God’s people were relying on their own power and political might for their protection, and God called them a tall tree, which He is going to **tear down** through the rise and fall of nations and political powers.

Nowadays, God is still in control of human history, even if we don’t know exactly what He’s doing. What I mean is, we can’t say for sure **how** God is acting in the world today as events play out and are reported in the news. What we **can** say for sure though, is that God is not the author of any evil that happens, and He is **ultimately** in control.

Whether it’s back in the days when Ezekiel was the prophet to a country facing destruction or today when **we** face challenges of all kinds in our country and in our own lives, like health concerns, relationship struggles, family issues, and money problems, God is still in control and God does what He wants whatever He wants. God acts beyond our predictions and **against** our expectations, but **always** for our good. “I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the

green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it.” (v. 24).

What we can be **most** thankful for is that God does what He wants when it comes to our **salvation**. In Ezekiel’s time what God wanted was to comfort the remnant, those who **hadn’t** given up their faith in the one true God. Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel, had already been laid low, humbled, cut down, sent into exile. Most of its people had turned from worshipping the LORD to worshipping dead useless idols. God wanted to give comfort and the hope of salvation for the remnant who remained faithful to Him.

The LORD promised to plant them again in the land. They would come back after a time of captivity; His covenant He many years earlier with King David would stand. So, the exiled community of Judah goes from the burn pile to a blossoming, fruit-bearing tree—even though **cedars never bear fruit**—big enough for all nations to find a home under its branches.

When God saves, you can’t predict it, you can’t stop it; it’s more wonderful than **any** of our expectations. God was working out His plan of salvation through King David’s great descendant **Jesus**. In Him we have forgiveness and salvation, too, just as the people of

Judah who trusted in God's promises.

What we learn from the people of Judah is that there's no place for our tall pride, our green and flourishing self-reliance, no place for the best **we've** done or the hardest **we've** tried. We rely on **God** for our strength.

For this to happen means for us to admit that apart from Him our lives are fruitless, barren, and sinful.

Being raised to life by God means first being torn down and laid low. That's the meaning behind this verse: "I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it" (v. 24).

Did you notice how our Epistle lesson today ended with these ominous words?: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil" (2 Cor. 5: 10). That sounds frightening! What this means is that it is so much better to be humble now, confess our sins, receive God's forgiveness and righteousness, which in turn leads us to try to live a life that pleases God than it is for us, on the other hand, to go through life continually rejecting these great gifts of His and then for it to be too late when we stand before the judgment seat of Christ. That's the

good that we do, that will bring us into everlasting life, trusting God, confessing our un-worthiness, and receive from Him forgiveness of sins, life and salvation.

That forgiveness comes to us now in ways that we **can** resist; God's Word and Sacraments. It's true, God does what He wants, whatever He wants, but one thing He chooses **not** to do is to **force** someone to believe in Him. He doesn't coerce anyone into staying faithful to Him. That's not **love** and God **is** love. He freely gives us eternal salvation through His Son and David's great descendant, our Lord Jesus, but we can reject that gift. We receive this gift of salvation in Baptism. There God kills and makes alive, He drowns the old human nature and raises up a new one to live with Him in righteousness and purity forever. (We saw God do just that for Tytan this morning when he was baptized into Christ's powerful death and resurrection.)

In Baptism, God tears us down, that is our old sinful nature, and makes a new person grow and flourish and bear fruit. Throughout our lives on this earth, we live as baptized children of God who've been joined to the tearing down and raising up power of God in Jesus Christ.

God does what He wants, and all He wants to do, He does for us in Christ. For our sake, the Son of God, who shared the eternal glory of the Father, was laid low Himself... in a manger. For our sake, the royal Son of David, the shoot and branch of Jesse, was dried up and nailed to a tree. For our sake, a broken corpse, laid low in a tomb, was raised up from the dead, bursting with resurrection life!

All of this was done to accomplish what God wanted done to make you His child, now and forever. To bring you to Him and keep you close to Him, whether on earth or in heaven. The God who does what He wants, whatever He wants, wants a close, everlasting relationship with you in Jesus Christ.

In Jesus, God is on your side; you can trust Him no matter what. And we need that promise, because ultimately we are not in control of our lives, our families, our church. **God** is in control. And God does whatever He wants, even if we don't understand it, even if we didn't expect it.

The Good News is that this God who works outside of human understanding and control, this almighty, all-powerful God Who 'brings low the high tree and makes the low tree high,' is acting for you. Even when it doesn't feel like it, even when it doesn't look like it, even in

the confusing and painful times, God is in control. God does what He wants, whatever He wants, and this is what He wants: to bless you and protect you, to humble you and save you and in saving you, to save other people too. God Himself has planted you and will make you grow and flourish and bear much fruit, through Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.