

Sermon Draft

Text: Ezekiel 17:22–24

Sermon: A New World

A symbol, an icon or emoji can communicate more than many words. Apple’s logo, for example, evokes a whole world of technology: iPhones, iPads, and computers with all the enhancements and complementary devices that attend them. Apple’s logo also denotes success and enormous wealth in view of Apple’s performance in the marketplace. It’s hard to imagine a world without Apple . . . and Samsung . . . and Dell.

Have you ever misplaced your cell phone? For most users, the cell phone has become a constant companion, and even its temporary loss creates great anxiety.

Our text uses a symbol or an icon, namely, a “tender sprig” from the topmost shoots of a cedar, to communicate a whole world of meaning. To understand how it invites us to see and to enter a world more lasting and wonderful than the world of technology, it is important to consider the context. If we understand the meaning of a “tender sprig” in context, far greater anxieties will be relieved than those we experience when we lose our cell phone!

The context is significant. The prophet Ezekiel utters these words from exile in Babylon. God had warned his people through the prophets that their continued apostasy would bring judgment. In the eighth century before Christ, Amos and Hosea had warned the leaders and people of the Northern Kingdom that their idolatry and worship of Baal would result in their destruction. They warned that the holy and righteous God of Israel would not tolerate idolatry and rebellion indefinitely.

The kings and the great majority of the people refused to heed these prophetic warnings. God's promises are always fulfilled. Samaria and the Northern Kingdom were conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BC.

In the south, God had previously sent Micah and Isaiah—also eighth-century prophets—to warn Jerusalem and Judah about the coming judgment upon their apostasy. Now Ezekiel, along with his contemporary Jeremiah, was called to announce the certain destruction of Jerusalem. Like their prophetic predecessors, events would demonstrate that Yahweh's word through Ezekiel and Jeremiah would come to pass.

Jerusalem, that great and historic city, where God had chosen to dwell in his temple (1 Ki 9:3), was conquered by the Babylonians in 586/7 BC.

The depth and darkness of the Southern Kingdom's rejection of Yahweh is described in 2 Kings 23—an episode during the reform of good king Josiah:

“The king commanded Hilkiah the high priest and the priests of the second order and the keepers of the threshold to bring out of the temple of the Lord all the vessels made for Baal, for Asherah, and for all the host of heaven” (2

Kings 23:4). The governmental and religious establishments had actually set up statues in Yahweh's temple to practice the worship of false gods. Their idolatry was detestable and flagrant!

Ezekiel, with Jeremiah, proclaims God's words of judgment and destruction. Judgment will come upon Jerusalem (chapters 4–7), upon the corrupted temple (chapters 8–11), upon the political and religious leaders (chapters 13–24), and upon the foreign nations (chapters 25–32).

It is into this foreboding context that the Lord's promise of the “tender sprig” is delivered by the prophet:

“Thus says the Lord God: ‘I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest” (vs 22–23).

The contrast could not be more compelling and stark! While Ezekiel’s horizon from end to end is filled with judgment and destruction upon an idolatrous city and people, this tender, tiny sprig points beyond to a new and wonderful epoch—inaugurated by a specific individual. A wonderful new world is promised and is on its way!

Ezekiel’s promise speaks directly to us who find ourselves in a very similar context. Idolatry surrounds us as the elites of our culture embrace every form of immorality and refuse to consider God’s call for a life of contrition and repentance. The most horrific and visible sign of this idolatrous paganism is the murderous practice of abortion. The blood of millions of these innocents cries out to heaven! How similar to what was happening in Ezekiel’s day.

We read that Josiah, in his effort to cleanse and to return the temple worship exclusively to Yahweh, “defiled Topheth, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, that no one might burn his son or his daughter as an offering to Molech” (2 Kings 23:10).

We are called to view our world through the eyes of Ezekiel and the other prophets. God delivers his holy will and word through them. Idolatry and evil seem so powerful while the position of the faithful seems so weak. Ezekiel beheld the destruction of Jerusalem. Those who confessed Yahweh as the only true God seemed so weak and marginal.

So today, Christians who uphold the claims of Sacred Scripture and confess Jesus to be the only way to God’s mercy and grace frequently appear to be without respect or standing. Many voices are even brash enough to label classic Christian morality mere bigotry. Beyond such verbal abuse, thousands of Christians have been publicly martyred in recent times, and there is less notice of this tragedy than a celebrity’s birthday or a White House press conference.

But Ezekiel leads us beyond despair and the apparently victorious context of the prevailing culture to a wonderful new world where all will know that the Lord has acted to rescue and redeem his people. And the “tender sprig” will be his agent to achieve this great reversal. God’s sure word and promise provides a climax to the chapter: ***“I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it”*** (v 24).

God’s promise through Ezekiel is precisely that of Hebrews 12: ***“Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted”*** (Hebrews 12:2–3).

Jesus is the “tender sprig!” In Jesus, God graciously positions you in a wonderful new world where there is a peace that the powers of this world can never provide.

It is a profound peace that places our hearts and souls at rest no matter what swirls around us.

As Jesus says: ***“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid”*** (John 14:27).

At the center of such peace are the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. His holy life and his atoning death have delivered us from the world of darkness and death to his wonderful new world of life now and forever in God’s Holy Absolution for our sins and his Spirit’s presence with us. Our Baptism into Jesus’ death and resurrection has bestowed a narrative of our own life that is defined by him: ***“We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life”*** (Romans 6:4). In Christ, the “Tender Sprig,” we are living a new life in His Wonderful New World!

Indeed, in today’s Epistle, listen to Paul as he yearns to experience that wonderful new world in its fullness:

“For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee” (2 Cor 5:1–5).

Yes, God’s promise through Ezekiel has been fulfilled. The “tender sprig” has come. Jesus Christ is that “tender sprig.” He has lifted up the lowly and built an “eternal house in heaven” for each of us in God’s wonderful new world.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen