

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church

Des Moines, WA

June 24, 2012

Ezekiel 17:22-24

What Does God Want?

- 1. He wants his Kingdom to grow.**
- 2. He wants us to know he is in control.**
- 3. He wants us to be a part of his work.**

Hymns: 255 – 188 – Closing: 324

All Scripture quotations from the NIV 1984

This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its top-most shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches. All the trees of the field will know that I the LORD bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.

“I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it.”

Ezekiel 17:22-24

“What shall we say the Kingdom of God is like?” Jesus asks. “It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet, when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.” What do you think when you hear those words. I don’t know mustard plants, but my mind goes quickly to a rapidly expanding rhododendron. As you listen to those words, it is impossible not to picture growth.

Now listen to these numbers. In 2001, the baptized members of the WELS numbered 404,224. In 2006, that number had decreased to 395,947. By 2011, it had dropped down to 385,321. In case you think it is just the WELS that people are averse to, here are some numbers about Christianity. As a nation, the number of Americans who call themselves Christian has dropped 11% since 1990. Only 18.7% of US residents claim to attend church regularly. In the group that would represent the future, 46% of people between the ages of 18 and 34 have no religion. If the current trends continue, the number of Christians will have decreased by 50% by 2050.

As I read through those numbers, I had a hard time envisioning that growing mustard plant which Jesus described. In fact, it sounds more like the tree out back that you know is going to die, it is just a matter of when.

So which is it? Is the kingdom of God a growing mustard plant or is it a kingdom that is being dialed down and cut back? It would seem that it has to be one or the other. After all, you can’t go both left and right, or up and

down. You can’t be both weak and strong. As we consider those numbers, it might lead us to ask the question, “What does God really want when it comes to his kingdom?”

As we look to the Word, the answer is clear. God definitely wants his kingdom to grow. His Word proclaims loudly that he wants this to happen. He says he wants disciples in all nations. And he has guaranteed success as Jeremiah 29 declares, *“For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”* Those words promise growth and they have been God’s words for his people since the beginning of time and that promise, that desire of God certainly doesn’t change.

But, as we mentioned, questions about God’s wants and God’s ability to get what he wants can rise up as we look around us. That is because we like things that are tangible. We demand to have evidence and proof before we can believe anything to be true. We hear discouraging numbers about our synod and about Christianity in general, and we might not like the picture that those numbers paint. We might not like the direction that those numbers show we are going in. There is no denying that there is a downward trend when it comes to the number of people who claim to be Christians. And it is easy for us to look at them and say that what God says he wants for his kingdom and what gets is not lining up.

And we see those numbers as proof that we aren’t growing. It is easy for us to put our stock in what we see rather than what we are told. Because we see problems, we doubt God’s Word. We don’t always have faith in what God tells us. That leads us to the belief that God isn’t getting what he says that he wants, namely a growing kingdom.

As we think about the church today, we can go to the OT church and find people who may have had the same questions about God’s ability to accomplish what he said that he wanted. For the nation of Israel during the prophet Ezekiel’s time, they were losing everything. All the officials and important people had been taken into captivity in Babylon. Those who remained in Israel faced a different reality as they lived under foreign control. Despite the bleak circumstances, the Israelites were all holding onto the thought that everything would be restored just like it had been in the past. But Ezekiel had a sobering message for the people. Things would get worse. Jerusalem and the temple would be completely destroyed. Everything that the Israelites knew would be taken from them. God’s OT church could hardly have been described as a growing, thriving plant.

And yet, in the midst of all that destruction, God had a message. He told the Israelites that he wanted something to happen; he wanted his kingdom to grow. He told a parable to explain how he wanted this to happen. Those same words also apply to us today.

First and foremost, God wants us to know that he is in control. That is what he tells us in Ezekiel. He begins with a decree, *“This is what the Sovereign LORD says.”* What we are about to hear isn’t like the propaganda of a hopeful politician on the campaign trail. From that title, we know that what we are about to hear is the word of the almighty God who is in control of all things.

Here is the plan: ***“I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it. I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain.”*** What jumps off the page is the declaration that the Lord is in control of this project. And how often don’t we need to be reminded of that. God’s guiding hand always does the work. The cedar that the Lord is trimming off of is the great royal line of King David. And even though this twig would come from the line of David, it would be transplanted so that it would be on its own. It wouldn’t be dependent on anyone else. It would have its own roots. It would grow and it would produce results, ***“It will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar.”*** This tiny twig that the Lord would plant would grow to be great and that is because this twig that the Lord is talking about is Christ. God was telling his people that this new cedar would be different. He could give the assurance that this tree would grow and thrive because of the roots it would have. This new kingdom that the Lord was planting would be rooted in Christ’s work and his words. That work is finished work, accomplished on the cross once for all. Those words are words of truth from God himself. The roots of this new and mighty cedar are two things that cannot wither, fade or die off.

And what about those branches of this tree? That is God assuring us that he wants us to be a part of his kingdom. We are the branches of this cedar that is rooted in Christ and his Word. One of those branches is the WELS. It is a branch that has been growing for a while, it is mature, it has produced fruit all over this country, and all over this world. In spite of overall declining numbers, we can look to new places for hope. It happens here in the US as new missions start and churches thrive and grow. Look at the *Forward In Christ* to see examples of that. It is seen in the world as we make inroads in China, as we grow in Japan, as we continue to share the Word in Western Africa. The branch continues to spread and grow.

Another of the branches on this tree is Holy Trinity. For us, just like every church, there will always be uncertainties about what we will grow into, and where we might be heading. But those doubts can be put at ease by looking at what we sprouted from. We are budded from a strong tree which is rooted in Christ. God is looking after us, making sure that we will grow how he wants, so that we can become strong and fruitful. Our assurance is again in his words: He is able to make the low tree grow tall.

And there is a promise for the branches of this mighty cedar. ***“Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches.”*** God sure has a different outlook, doesn’t he? Here we sit, so often worrying about where we are going, trying to decide the best ways to conserve and make payments, and God is talking about the strength and growth of his tree. He gives the promise that the branches which are in Christ will be strong enough to give protection. It is a place of safety and shelter for those who need it. God won’t allow for us to be without safety. He won’t leave us without a church to find rest in. He wants us to be a part of his growing kingdom. He wants his kingdom to continue to reach out to all kinds of people who have not yet found the rest

which is found in his Word. He wants us to continue to grow and find those who need his Word.

This is what God wants for his kingdom, and there is something different about the things that God wants. When we want something, even if we want it with all of our desire, we might not get it. But God gets what he wants! He pronounces in the last verse, ***“I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it.”*** God’s word and his action go hand-in-hand. What he says is as good as done. His wish list for his kingdom will be accomplished. And he challenges us to remain confident in what he tells us. Be confident that the kingdom will grow as God has promised it will. Be confident that God is in control, he is planting and caring for his kingdom. Be confident that we are an important part of making all of this happen. God’s love, his mercy and his grace will never leave us. Amen.