**Sermon for June 16 2024 Ezekiel 17:22-24 “Successful Sprigs”**

Thus says the Lord God: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar;  
I will set it out. I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind. All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the Lord have spoken; I will accomplish it.

We need to talk about dads and sons and hopes and dreams and the flourishing of God today, friends. For we hold fast in our faith that God has created each of us for flourishing, not for languishing, and today especially we remember that we grow into our potential with much contributory assistance, fathers and grandfathers and uncles being an active force in all of our lives. But in order to talk about dads and sons and hopes and dreams and the flourishing of God today, friends, we need to talk about sprigs.

“Sprig” is not a technical term in the worlds of botany or kitchen lore, but it is used frequently in both. A sprig always refers to a small cut-off of a plant, often an herb, and you can toss a sprig of rosemary or thyme or oregano into nearly any savory dish without fear of the Recipe Police pounding down your door. You can plant little sprigs in your garden and help them along until they take root; in fact, this word can even become a verb: *what were you doing out in the greenhouse? Oh, just sprigging.* With sprigs we have the unavoidable imagery of installing a small thing, in the soil or the stewpot, hoping it will expand and grow and share its goodness. Or, if the Lord God is doing the sprigging, we can skip the hope part, *knowing* that God’s will always finds a way.

Our passage today comes slightly before the middle of the long writing we know as Ezekiel. He was a prophet carted away during the first wave of the Babylonian captivity, and spent his mature life in Babylon, about as far south of Bagdad as Sacramento is south of us. And from there, his prophetic voice rang out about his interpretation of why things had gone so recently awfully for the Hebrew people, but also about the faithfulness of God and the restoration of those same people. So after a particularly aggressive and no-nonsense discussion of the disobedience of the Chosen People, and the horrific consequences of those choices, he says these words: *Thus says the Lord God: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar.*

We are shortsighted if we are among the Christian folk who assume that God is invariably portrayed in the Old Testament as a merciless tyrant. There are those aspects, and plenty of them, but the tenderness of God, the kindly mercy, the redemptive leanings of the Lord are right there too, encouraging and sustaining people’s faith for centuries.

Still…what does any of this have to do with Father’s Day? Well, I’m gonna tell ya, and tell ya with some authority, because I am a sprig. Firstborn son, tallest person in my family, and thankfully having lived into the vision of my earthly father, Anthony Joseph Vallelunga. Conceived in Sicily, born in America, Roman Catholic to the bone, he wanted what every Catholic dad wants for his son, that I would become a priest. I got as close as I could; close enough for him, anyway, who always enjoyed confusing people by introducing me and my spouse as “My son David the priest, and his wife.” But even though our family went Protestant under my mom’s direction, he was proud of my sprigginess, that I would go forth and produce holy things rather than profane, and that the goodly ways of God would not be ignored in my life. For I am to him what a sprig is to the plant; a subset, to be sure, but one who can travel and replant and propagate the values of the original tree. We live on in this world through our sprigs, right? And then they have little spriglets of their own and it all moves forward.

When healthy-enough parents create healthy-enough kids and send them out into the world, they are absolutely following the divine recipe book. Some of us sprigs never really flourish, despite the designs of both God and Dad. But many do, becoming, figuratively at least, what Ezekiel described: *we* *produce boughs and bear fruit, and become noble cedars. Under our protection every kind of bird will live; in the shade of our branches will nest winged creatures of every kind. And then all the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord.* So… us grown-up sprigs give glory to God through our hospitality, through our embracing of the needy, through our inclusion of the discouraged, and we provide a ‘heart home’, and sometimes an *actual* home, to those little ones who wander through our world with neither roots nor resources. When this great forest here assembled does its godly work, shade is brought and drink is provided and food is cooked and shelter is offered, and God gets the credit, for nurturing us along until we can then nurture others.

Ezekiel closes this little prophecy with a stern realism that makes the squishy faithful uncomfortable. Once we survive our sprigginess and become rooted and grounded and all of that, we tend to forget who we are and, most importantly, *whose* we are. Knowing that very human tendency, God addresses it: *I, the Lord, bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the Lord have spoken; I will accomplish it.* You might remember the most famous words from the prophet Micah, the ones about what God requires of us; doing justice, and loving kindness, and then the one we always forget, walking *humbly* with God. Our first hymn said it already this morning: *for though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.* I have said it before and I will continue while I have breath, that practicing humility is very challenging for American Christians in particular. We want to become flourishing trees and great providers and central plantings in our community, but we don’t want to remember our spriggy days, don’t want to remember our dependent days, the days when, apart from the accommodating mercy of God, we would have shriveled up and blown away long ago. And so despite our best efforts to be all that we can be, which is good, we need to cultivate our own recognition and gratitude for the Great Tree from which we have all descended, sprig by sprig.

You may have had the best dad ever, or possibly the worst, but most likely a Dad that did his best with what he had to create the environment in which you could flourish. We have been planted and watered, literally, we have been sprigged. It now becomes our joyful task to grow in our hospitality, to fling wide our leafy boughs of welcome and inclusion, to offer shade and respite in honor of both our earthly fathers and our heavenly one, too. Like it says at the top of

your bulletin, *Patres nostri omnes celebramus! Today, we celebrate all of our fathers.* And the best Father’s Day gift we can ever give, to God or to Dad, is becoming successful sprigs. Amen!