

Kirk of St James
Sunday June 17th, 2018
Sermon “The Power of Hope”
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

Full disclosure--I normally dislike when during a talk, sermon or, speech someone asks me to close my eyes and picture something! But this morning just for a second, I would like to go back to the reading in Ezekiel because it is easy to miss. Take a moment to hear the words once more and listen and imagine in the manner you feel most comfortable. As you do so, just think about what is being promised in this passage. What do these words mean to the Israelites and to you in your own life?

²² 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.

²³ 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.

²⁴ 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.

These words were uttered by the prophet during a turbulent and bleak time in Israel's history. Carried away into exile their suffering was great, and their questions were many. It takes a certain kind of strength to proclaim hope into the hopeless.

If we were to imagine a modern-day version of this we would find ourselves sitting in the middle of a refugee camp, among exiles, driven from their homes, and suffering great hardship. (We can likely think of numerous places around the world currently facing such difficulty.) Somehow, against all logic a voice speaks up right in the middle of it and proclaims the promise of a better day. The hard part? It isn't going to happen right away. How many of us feel that we would have the faith and strength to do that? Ezekiel did because he knew that "our sovereign God is in the business of upsetting normal expectations. Ours is a God of surprises, of reversing expectations, as Jesus will make a career of doing in disappointing long-held views of how the Messiah was to be identified." But the Israelites don't know any of this yet. Instead they just know their lives have become unbearable and they don't know how it will ever get better.

This moment experienced by the Israelites really is the crux of faith isn't it? That somehow against the backdrop of suffering words like these truly find their power. As one of the most powerful emperors in the ancient world watched for signs of a threat to his power he missed the baby born in a manger. As Jesus was calling the disciples there was a moment when one of them asked "can anything good come out of Nazareth?" After meeting Jesus, he sees the folly of his question. How can it be that a man crucified and buried would become the hope of the world? Our faith and our hope hang against the backdrop of the impossible.

Similar sentiments are expressed in the parable of the mustard seed. It is about the power of God to work in the world. It is about welcoming, where all the birds of the air can gather together. Ezekiel has a similar claim when he says every kind of bird will live in the shade of its branches. It is also about subverting the way we assume the world does or should work. No farmer planting those little mustard seeds likely saw anything remotely important about them other than the ways the plant could be used. God is constantly challenging us in how we see the world. God is constantly telling us to look for the possibilities around us.

I was wondering what some practical examples of this might look like in today's world and I came across a reflection by a fellow PWS&D board member who summed it up beautifully. Presbyterian World Service and Development has a yearly budget of about four million dollars. Considering some of the bigger budgets posted by larger organizations and keeping in mind the great need of the world what we have to offer often feels like a drop in the ocean. However, instead of being discouraged the staff work hard to find the places where that money can be put to greater use.

As Rob reflected " Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world—ranking number 170 of 188 countries on the Human Development Index. Malawi is where one half of all PWS&D's development money is spent; a country where we Presbyterians have many historical bonds. And where your support is directed at the poorest of the poor. In fact, it sometimes seems that the people we are helping are beyond poor. Set on a scorched landscape where rivers have become dried up riverbeds, children rise each morning, often with nothing to face but a day with no programs or resources or toys. Some schools are so poor there are no chairs or desks or chalkboards... just teachers left to their own resources.

And of course, there is death—high rates of mothers dying during pregnancy or in childbirth and high rates of child mortality. In Malawi, one in every one hundred pregnant women die, and you may have to beat those odds many times over because you may be pregnant often. Nearly three in every one hundred babies die. These women and children are victims of high rates of adolescent pregnancies, unskilled birth attendants and poor emergency care.

But change is happening in these difficult circumstances, through your support, along with funds from the Government of Canada. Community organizers teach about good nutrition and early warning signs in pregnancy. Groups are formed for men to learn about their responsibilities to their wives and newborns. Women are encouraged to move into hospitals weeks before their delivery dates and when that can't happen, bicycle ambulances are provided to get them to the hospital for delivery.

In the hospitals safe and private delivery rooms are being built and good quality neo-natal care given. The death rates have dropped dramatically. In some areas there have been no deaths at all, and in

others the numbers are well below the national average. Together, through PWS&D, we are helping save many lives and truly carrying out the gospel's call for social justice.

I had mentioned refugee camps earlier. One of our programs provides food vouchers to Syrians who have fled to Lebanon. One of the men we helped named Abdal says, "I am not allowed to work here. Without the vouchers, my family would have nothing to eat. You have wide hands. Thank you for not forgetting us." One last story that for some reason really challenged me involved an impossibly small investment. The staff at PWS&D have seen firsthand what can be done with just a little. As part of the sustainable livelihoods project in Malawi, a woman named Sara was loaned five dollars. She invested it in a small retail business and netted two dollars. With this small profit she bought a set of dishes. Those dishes meant that each member of her family could now have their own plate rather than eating from a common pot. This seemingly small and simple purchase vastly improved her family's hygiene and she can continue supporting them through her new business.

The thought of five dollars making such an enormous difference for a family really caught me off guard. It is like the mustard seed, and the cedar branch. When I have five dollars I see a coffee and a bagel. This woman saw a business and an opportunity to help her family. It is humbling sometimes to be reminded of what is possible. A local example of wonderful work here in our own community is at the heritage gardens behind the farm centre. Here volunteers help work plots of soil that in turn produces fresh veggies that are sent to the Upper Room and Food Bank. All around us are incredible ways God is at work in the world--if we look for him.

My prayer for all of us today is that God constantly reminds us of what is possible through his power and that each of us have hands and hearts to help engage in that work in countless ways. I also pray that when things begin to feel hopeless or overwhelming in our lives that there is an Ezekiel reminding us that it will get better. For a fun summer challenge--I challenge you to take five dollars and over July and August see what you can do with it. Make a lemonade stand with your grandchildren, buy some seeds, or some craft supplies and see how you can multiply it! We would love to hear the results if you try it! Let us see what God can do together!