

Weekly Reading – Monday, June 8, 2009

With Pentecost and Trinity Sunday behind us, we shift to "Ordinary Time," which continues until a new Advent begins in late autumn of the year. Sunday, June 14th, 2009, the texts in view here, has three designations, the Eleventh Sunday of Ordinary Time, the second Sunday after Pentecost and "Proper 6." Heavens, what a lot of labels!

With the turn (return) to Ordinary Time, the lectionary gives us two Old Testament options, one from the semi-continuous readings, beginning with a series from I and II Samuel, the other the "typological" choice. These, the typological, are chosen to supplement or illuminate the gospel reading and have no sequential pattern. There are arguments in favor of either choice, semi-continuous and typological. This week I offer brief comments on both.

I Samuel 15: 34 - 16: 13 or Ezekiel 17: 22 - 24

This is the delightful story of Samuel's visit to Jesse and the anointing of David. Get a load of God in this story. God is impatient, contrary, and surprising. First off, God is past ready to move on from Saul and is fed up with Samuel's stuckness. Then God has to push and prod a reluctant Samuel to make a house call on Jesse. Finally, vs. 6 and following, God keeps overruling what seem to Samuel the obvious and logical choices of king material (biggest, oldest, strongest) in favor of the least, the youngest, who as it happens is not even present because he's out watching the family flock. Considering God in this narrative, I am reminded of Walter Breuggemann's observation, "The strangest thing about the Bible is God." The effect is to keep the focus away from Samuel, who is only ostensibly the main character, and on God. God's ways are not, as Isaiah says, our ways, and God's thoughts are not our thoughts. Thank God!

The Ezekiel passage is chosen to supplement the reading from Mark's gospel, and it does, but no better really than the Samuel text. Here we have an image of God as the planter or transplanter, an image given to a fallen and vanquished Israel. God will take a sprig from the top of the cedar and "I myself will plant it." Improbably, the sprig will grow up into a great tree in which the birds of the air will find shelter (hence the link to Mark 4). But the point, much like Samuel, is the sovereignty of God. "All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord." Long ago I noticed the way the boughs of the tree common to the Northwest, the Douglas Fir, all turn upward at the their end, as if to point to and praise God. All around us the trees bear witness . . . and most of the time we miss it.

II Corinthians 5: 6 - 17

The lectionary gives the option of omitting verses 11 - 13, but if you do that you miss the wonderful line, "For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you." Paul, throughout this passage, is right at the edge of breaking into hymn, song and doxology, which is where his sometimes dense theology really leads, that is, it leads to praise (like the Douglas Firs, see above). The point, for Paul is that something has happened, something that changes everything. "And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them." I believe it was Rowan

Williams who described Paul's transformation as one from self-dependence to Other-dependence. That's evident here. Then, in the final two verses, the decisiveness of the something that has happened: "So if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation." This is not good advice; it is good news. Too often contemporary preaching is more good advice than good news.

Mark 4: 26 - 34

In a chapter of parabolic teaching, much of it using images of seed and sower (hence the Ezekiel choice), we get two more such images, both of which point to the hidden yet persistent power of God. The first, verse 26, is of a sower and the process of growth and germination. The mystery of it all is emphasized. "The seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how." The second, verse 31, is the familiar image of the mustard seed, the smallest of seeds, the greatest of shrubs, and like the tree in Ezekiel, becoming a shelter for the birds of the air. The point, as in Samuel, Ezekiel and II Corinthians, is the amazing power of God, the mystery of this power and the abundance of it. It's not about you . . . it's about God. The choice of young David is sort of like the choice of the mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds. In a recent sermon on a mustard seed text I told the story of the small church I served that sponsored a small family of five refugees, the Cha family, in 1979. This Hmong family has gone on to flourish, growing from mustard seed smallness and vulnerability, to itself become a spreading shrub or tree, one that grows flowers and vegetables that grace tables throughout our region, one that has spawned college-educated professionals of their children, one that has issued in twenty grandchildren. The mustard seed is not just a small things become great things story, though it is that, but a story of God's capacity and faithfulness, that we might put our trust, with Paul, not in ourselves but in God, in God's mercy, mystery, majesty and grace. It is also an implicit critique of the world's confidence in bigness, size, worldly power, big titles, and all that.