

Highs and Lows

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
June 14, 2015
Text: Ezekiel 17:22-24

I had a great time while I was away this past week on retreat at the Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, CT. It was everything I hoped it would be. Well, at least for the most part. The women's guest residence, St. Gregory's, is a 250 year old farmhouse which has been updated, to a point. It's charming, lovely and quaint on the first floor. Exposed beams, wide plank floors, comfortable furniture. The second floor, however, is another story.

The bedrooms and bathrooms are, shall we say, rustic. Windows are the ancient, original casement windows. They've been fitted out with storm windows and screens, probably just after World War II when the nuns first bought the property. Some of them work, and some don't so I counted myself lucky when I found a bed next to a working window, until I went to bed that first night. That's when I realized all the various flying bugs which had sneaked into the house during the day were all trying to get back out at night and were drawn to the fresh air wafting in through my open window, convinced that was the way out. So, each night I fell asleep to the hum of all sorts of insect wings banging into the screen. (shudder) But, I prevailed!

I prevailed because the days at the Abbey are simply amazing. I wanted, needed to go to the Abbey for what I knew it would offer me – the chance to be literally cocooned in the prayer which defines the rhythm of the Abbey's days. Lauds and Prime are at 6:15am; Terce is at 8am followed by Mass; Sext and None are at noon; Vespers and Benediction are at 5:00pm and Compline is at 7:30pm. Each of these prayer offices is chanted in Latin in a Gregorian chant form that dates back to the dawn of the Middle Ages. Because I only know a little of the Latin, I literally just relax into the prayer, letting it wash over me and surround me with its powerful beauty and overwhelming grace. Each of the Offices is preceded by bells ringing – 15 minutes before as a warning to the nuns and guests wherever they are to get ready for prayer. The bells ring again as the Office is beginning and once again as it is ending. So, literally, the days at the Abbey ring with prayer inviting attentiveness to one's relationship with God.

More to be said about the Abbey but that's for another day. The point I wanted to make was that I had a wonderful time which actually exceeded my hopes and expectations. How often does that happen? I don't know about you but it doesn't happen that often to me. So, to say I was on a high while I was heading home would be an understatement. And that high lasted about 25 minutes because almost as soon as I got on Interstate 84, I encountered a huge traffic jam due to road construction in

Waterbury. Got through that in about 20 minutes and was okay the rest of the way – until I got to Providence when I hit another massive backup because of an accident at Allens Avenue at exit 18. Not to worry, I told myself. It's all still good! Sure enough the traffic broke up just past the accident and I was almost home sooner than I expected.

Then I came around the corner on my street and was shocked to see that it looked like fall had happened overnight with all the leaves of autumn piled up on *only* our front yard, front porch and driveway. I mean, you could not see the grass. “Geesh!” I thought. “What’s up with this?” Peter and I had worked so hard on the yard and gardens before I left and everything looked just beautiful as I pulled out of the driveway on Tuesday. And now, just three days later, it was like we hadn’t touched it since October. Now, I should stop and explain that this is a regular occurrence at our house every year because we have a massive, ancient sycamore tree in our front yard that has a peculiar kind of blight which causes it to shed most of its first leafing out. We’ve had it checked by an arborist and he assures us the tree is very healthy. It just has this weird sort of chronic tree disease that it has to work its way through each year.

The funny thing is each year I think it’s not going to be so bad and then it is. Each year the first leafing of the tree is bigger and bigger and it drops all kinds of healthy green seeds. Then a

few leaves, then a few more. I keep hoping, telling myself actually, that one of these years it will surprise me and not completely drop that first leafing. And every year it does. But I keep hoping, expecting it will be miraculously cured of this blight for which there is no cure but patience. This year I'd done a couple of rakings and had convinced myself that was it. Then I came home on Friday and discovered just how wrong I was. Yikes! Talk about your highs and lows! I went from a cocoon of prayer to a mantle of leaves in hours with nothing but really annoying traffic in between. I literally went from the sublime to the ridiculous, but then that's life, isn't it?

Highs and lows are the stuff of life for us all the time. You go away on vacation and come home to a problem you hadn't planned on. You get a nice little raise at work only to find out the electric bill is going up at a rate that will eat up your raise and then some. You finally patch things up with your best friend and then have an argument with your cousin who's still mad at your mutual friend. Life is just chock full of high points and low points, or so it seems. But, really, most of life is lived sort of in the middle of the two. Usually, life is pretty mundane, pretty routine. We all have our comfortable little ruts. We do the same thing every morning when we get up. Maybe we even eat the same thing for lunch each day – my mother ate cottage cheese and one half of a cling peach for a 20 year stretch once. We like our coffee

or tea fixed the same way. We like the same plants in the gardens each summer. We go to the same grocery store, the same gas station, the same pharmacy all the time. Am I right? Of course! Life needs to feel comfortable and familiar. Life needs to feel like we're in control. Only thing is, of course, we're not and that's what the highs and lows of life remind us of.

This is something our friend Ezekiel from this morning's reading understands. Ezekiel is a crazy prophet. I mean, literally, nuts. Some scholars believe he had some sort of mental illness because of the incredible nature of the visions he sees and describes and the antics he does himself. A few weeks ago we reflected together on his valley of dry bones vision, probably his most famous and one of the strangest. Today's text is quite calm by comparison. Now, what leads up to this morning's verses are more typical of Ezekiel – railing against the evils of the kingdom of Israel which is sure to bring about its doom. But then he explains that even though he is sure all this really bad stuff is going to happen to Israel because it has drifted away from God – and it does – God will never fully abandon them. God will not leave them totally bereft. The vision by which Ezekiel makes this point – that God will not leave them bereft – is the content of this morning's text. It's actually quite lovely.

God takes the topmost tender twig from what Ezekiel calls the “noble cedar.” Cedar trees can be massive as you know and

they are incredibly beautiful trees. This reference to “noble cedar” means, though, that this is a particularly important tree from which God is taking the twig. This is a sacred tree which connects heaven and earth and whose branches spread out around the earth. It is from this incredible tree that God takes a twig and then promises to plant it on “a high and lofty mountain,” most likely Mount Zion, a sacred mountain in ancient Israel. This tree God plants on the sacred mountain will grow and thrive and provide a home and food for creatures of all sorts.

This is a vitally important vision of hope for the future which Ezekiel is describing. It’s a lovely scene in its own right, but its true power and relevance for us comes clear when we realize the context from which Ezekiel is writing about his vision of hope in the midst of highs and lows. Ezekiel was a temple priest in Jerusalem at the time it was conquered and eventually destroyed by Babylon. As a way to ensure the complete subjugation of people they conquered, the Babylonians would remove the leadership of the city – in this case Jerusalem – and take them back to Babylon as captives where they were put to work as common laborers. This brutal tactic accomplished two things: It separated the leadership from the populace so that the chance of revolt was minimized if not eliminated and it broke the will of the leadership by forcing them to work as commoners. As a leader of the temple, Ezekiel would have thus gone from being at the

pinnacle of society to the very bottom where he was a menial worker from a conquered people. He had experienced the highest of highs and the lowest of lows and that's what he's describing here but he's doing much more. He is reminding himself, and all of us who strive to understand how God is moving in our own lives, that God is right in the middle of all those highs and lows. God knows when we are soaring at the top of the things and God knows when we plummet, hitting rock bottom. God is right there at the pinnacle celebrating and rejoicing with us. And God is there too when we slide down lower than we thought we'd ever go. God loves us through them both.

The thing is, we don't tend to think of God when everything is going great, when we're soaring through those glorious high points as everything is amazingly wonderful and working out better than we thought possible. Oh, maybe we take a moment or two to offer God our thanks but do we really revel in God's presence in those moments? I'm thinking not so much, because in those sweet moments we are wrapped up in savoring them. Lucky for us God understands that about us and God is very patient. That's what the tree metaphor in this vision is about. After all, it takes a very long time for a tiny seedling to grow into a towering tree.

And that's what we need to remember in all those low points of life, those times when God seems so very far away and we feel

so very much at the mercy of the vagaries of life. Yes, sometimes stuff happens and we end up in unpleasant, even gut wrenching circumstances: Job loss, broken relationships, scary illnesses, chronic conditions which refuse to loosen their grip on our lives. These low points are brutal, but Ezekiel reminds us they are not the last word in our lives. His beautiful vision of God planting a tree reminds us of that. God is in the middle of all these circumstances of life with which we contend all the time – the high points, the low points and everything in between. “I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree,” God says. Life happens, God says, and I’m there with you through it all. Things will change. Sometimes they get better. Sometimes they get worse. But, through it all, I’m there with you God says, and we’ll figure out what comes next together. “I the Lord have spoken; I will accomplish it,” we are assured.

So as you head out into the rest of your day today and the rest of the week, I urge you to hold on to Ezekiel’s beautiful vision of God right smack in the middle of your life planting trees. All around you God is planting trees of hope promising new life of a sort we can only imagine. All we need do is trust God and be patient while God helps us work things out. Not easy to do, I know. But with God and the support of each other we can do it. With God and the support of each other we can do anything. Amen.