

## The LORD's Monumental Work of Mercy

3<sup>rd</sup> Sun. after Pent. – 6/13/21 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Ezekiel 17:22-24 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 22, “**Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘I Myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. ...and I Myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain’.**”

### **Introduction**

⌘ (After Sermon Hymn #427) “In the Cross of Christ I Glory” – why would anyone ever think that you could find “glory” in a cross; in an instrument of torture and death?

→ Yet that is exactly what the cross does for us Christians, isn't it? It serves as a monument for us; an item, when placed before us, as we have prominently placed here in our own sanctuary above the altar, that reminds us of a particular person and event – of our Savior Jesus and His death on the cross for our eternal salvation.

⌘ That's what monuments are designed and intended to do; to keep the memory of a specific person or event in history alive – not only for those who witnessed it firsthand – but also for the generations to come.

→ Think for example of the Washington Monument, placed on the highest point at the center of the National Mall in Washington DC. When it was completed in 1884 it was the tallest building in the world at just over 555 feet high. That white marble spire is intended to bring the indispensable military and political leadership of General George Washington to mind, as he served this country in leading us out from under the rule of Great Britain and into the freedom and establishment of The United States of America as a new and independent country.

→ Yet, while that monument directs us to remember the greatness of George Washington, at its very peak, inscribed on the eastern face of the aluminum pointed cap are two Latin words “Laus Deo”, which means, “Praise be to God”.

⌘ That is bottom-line intention of the LORD's words and illustration given to the prophet Ezekiel in our Old Testament Reading here today. God offers up an image to His people of Judah who are in exile in Babylon at the time. He describes Himself as the architect and builder of a monument that He intends to prepare and put in place; a monument of hope for a people who find themselves in a hopeless situation. It's a monument pointing all people to know of and remember God's boundless mercy in the past, each day in His people's lives in the present, and going forward into eternity.

### **I. What is the Event?**

⌘ So let's take a closer look at *The LORD's Monumental Work of Mercy*. At first glance, the image Ezekiel places before the people seems to capture God's gracious intervention and work on behalf of His people who are struggling in exile.

→ Now remember, they've been taken away from their land, their place of worship and their very identity as God's chosen people. Right now they feel like dead, abandoned, rotting, old trees.

→ Yet, the LORD places before them the image of a lofty, vibrant, mighty cedar tree. From the uppermost shoots He promises to break off a tender sprig and carry it to “the mountain height of Israel” to “plant it” (v.22).

⌘ That place God is talking about is Mt. Zion where His temple had been built before the Babylonians destroyed it. So God is talking about a new and vibrant life back in their homeland.

- This cedar that God plants will grow to be a mighty monument. It will “bear branches” and “produce fruit” and “become a noble cedar” (v.23). It will be a true monument; a place of protection and shade and nesting for “every kind of bird” (v.23). In fact “all the trees of the field” will see this cedar and the Lord says in verse 24 that in viewing and experiencing this cedar, they “will know that I am the LORD”.
- ✘ So, on the surface, it seems that this image points the people to the hope of a triumphant restoration back home in Jerusalem...that is until you read the text and its context more closely!
  - Because you see, Ezekiel just finished using the same kind of language to describe why they're in their current situation to begin with. In those verses He spoke of a great eagle breaking off the topmost twig of a tree and carrying it off to a foreign land. That's Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. And then he describes a second great eagle and a vine that bent its roots toward this second eagle, hoping for water.
  - This was God's word of judgment against His people, where He is forcing them first to reflect honestly upon their current suffering in exile at the same time that Ezekiel prophesies about God's future work.
  - You see here's the deal, when trouble came their way because they were not being faithful to the LORD, did they turn back to the LORD in repentance as they should? No, they actually turned to that second eagle; to Egypt for help. They were supposed to be God's chosen people, but instead of trusting in God, they were placing their trust in governments and things of this world.
  - And so their judgment became even worse. God needed to make sure that His judgment would be remembered first, lest they keep falling again and again to sin; kind of like we do so often still today.
- ✘ We have monuments like that today don't we; harsh monuments that capture the significance of great suffering in our world even as they point to a hopeful future for those who remember the atrocity. Think for example of the Holocaust Memorial or the Vietnam Memorial and many others like them.
  - Monuments that direct us to remember the results and consequences of sin and our part in it, so that we might be better prepared to receive God's promise of deliverance in humility and faith.

## II. What is the Message?

- ✘ By offering this double-sided image, Ezekiel then opens the eyes of the people to see in their exile God's creative work of mercy. Notice in verse 24 that “all the trees of the field”; that means all nations of the world will come to know of God's transforming work; how He humbles the exalted and exalts the humble.
  - He does both of these with Judah. He humbles His people in judging their unfaithfulness and sin, yet He exalts them by working miraculously and mercifully for their salvation.
- ✘ So this image before us from Scripture today, in a time of suffering while His people are in exile, is a monument that brings God's gracious promise to mind; the promise that He will soon intercede. He will break into their lives and He will work mightily in mercy for their salvation.
  - But what is that work? What is it that God is promising to do? He promises to take a sprig from His cedar; that is an offspring from His people, one who will be small and humbled at first, but will become a ruler who will be exalted on the mountain of Israel.

- This monument, you see, ultimately points to Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promise. Jesus' humble birth and early life came to an even greater time of judgment and suffering as He endured the punishment for all people and their sin on the cross.
- ✘ Yet "In the Cross of Christ I Glory", we sang. It's there in His great suffering and death that you and I and believers of all time find our sins covered and cleansed and paid for by the blood of someone else in our place.
  - It's there on the cross that God humbles His almighty Son, bringing Him to the lowest of lows so that He actually embodies all sin and evil of all mankind throughout all of time. And it is there, at the same time that God exalts His people of faith, lifting us up out of the muck and mire of our sin-steeped hopelessness to seat us in the place of His Son; to wrap us in the robe of His righteousness; to declare us now to be "innocent" of sin because of Jesus!
  - This is the Monumental Work of Mercy that Ezekiel points us all to see this day, trusting that God works in Jesus to bring life out of death and hope out of suffering!

### III. Monuments of Mercy Today

- ✘ Yes, today you and I are among "the trees" that verse 24 is talking about that "shall know" of God's reversal works of mercy every day in our lives. You see, we Christians are unique because we see the things of this world differently than those who do not know of God's monumental mercy at work.
  - We hear, for example, the words of Jesus in Matthew 10:39 when He says, "Whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" and we don't shake our heads in disgust like the world does because we know that putting Christ before ourselves; that sacrificing our own selfish desire is the only true way to find true peace, not only into eternity, but even now as we suffer here on earth.
  - Yes, looking to the monument of Jesus' cross and empty tomb, we find strength not only to endure times of suffering and trouble, but actually to do as Paul talks about in Romans 5:3-6 where he says, "More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly". You see there, Christ's death is the monument that gives us hope – even giving us the ability to "rejoice" in times of suffering.
- ✘ Each one of us has seen many of these monumental works of God's mercy in our lives; in our world. It's just a matter of whether or not we have actually seen them as such, but they're there.
  - Let me share an example in my life. Many of you know that before I was a pastor, now more than 30 years ago, I was in business management for a number of years. The "monumental event" occurred one day when my regional manager pulled me aside after I had given a difficult but honest answer to some visiting corporate executives. And she told me, "Keith, if you're going to be so honest, then you won't have a place in this company". That was not a great day for me at first. I had just been told that my career was over.
  - Yet now I know that it was the beginning of God's great work of mercy in my life, leading me first to leave the business world, and endure along with Mary Beth much greater suffering as I went through six more years of schooling (that was also filled with great joy along the way) to eventually be blessed, now for the last 25 years, to be a part of what I believe is the greatest career on the face of the earth.

- ✘ That's just one example. You all have your own monuments of mercy where God has shown His mercy in taking events and things that the world sees as a negative, but using them for mercy and new life and great blessing and salvation!
  - ➔ For example, at a loved one's death, where God often uses that time of grief and sorrow to bring a person closer to Him and grow them in their faith.
  - ➔ Or experiencing a significant injury or accident, where God first of all reminds us how fragile earthly life is, but the shock of that reality is used by the Lord to bring our priorities and lives back to a proper focus.
  - ➔ Other events and situations like war and disease can be monuments to humble us and turn us to the Lord for help and strength and comfort. Even something like great conflict, when it is addressed in Christian love, can be used by God to repair and restore relationships to a point that they are even stronger than they were before.

## **Conclusion**

- ✘ Yes, scattered around our lives there are many monuments of God's merciful work. When we view them in faith, they cause us to pause and reflect and think about things as we seek to serve our Lord according to His will.
  - ➔ The comfort and assurance though, is that God is always at work in and among us friends, just as He was at the time of Ezekiel. His mercy is always at work for our good. His monuments all point us ultimately to His Son as our Savior. And His promise has not changed regarding our place with Him in eternal glory. As He said at the end of verse 24, "I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it." Amen.