

Jeremiah 33:14-16, “Garlands – for Twigs” (Advent 1C) ‘15

Dear Brothers and Sisters through faith in Christ,

Next to Moreland Road just off of Highway 43 there is a tree growing. It is not a very grand tree. It is really just a “sprout” (v.15). It is the most forlorn-looking thing, because it has long since been de-leaved by the cold weather and is surrounded by weeds and debris. This tiny tree is constantly being whipped back and forth by the fall breezes. It is the most pathetic TWIG – you could possibly notice.

And yet I did as I was driving home from a shopping trip to Brookfield Square. Why did I see it? Because a strand of GARLAND had been blown from a neighbor’s outdoor display and had entwined around it. And as the fall winds lashed the TWIG into a frenzied flutter, the GARLAND acted as a banner that spoke to me more clearly of Christmas than any of the glitz and glamour I had recently seen in the mall.

This wayward GARLAND signaled that it was Christmas again; time to concentrate on “the reason for the season.” It was just a piece of golden aluminum but I thought it was so special that out of all His creation *that* day – God had chosen to decorate this insignificant, ugly, little TWIG with a shiny covering; making it a holiday beacon for anyone who would notice.

1. By Using the Insignificant. But that’s just like God to use insignificant things for His own purposes. In our text, God promises to send a special person – “a righteous Branch” in fulfillment of the covenant He had made with “the house of Israel and...Judah” (vs.14-15). That name “righteous Branch” was applied by the prophets to the coming Messiah. So it is used here by Jeremiah. The coming Messiah or “righteous Branch” will “do what is just and right” (v.15). In other words, He will act fairly and honestly. What’s more He will bring peace and security by saving others (v.16). From where will this “righteous Branch” come? He will come “from David’s line” – a royal family which soon would become – insignificant (v.15).

Have you ever cut down a tree in your yard and then noticed a TWIG shooting up from its stump? Jeremiah is using this image. Yet for most Jews this new TWIG from a dead stump is a picture of shame. Recall how David was the founding king of Israel’s glory days. In fact, God promised that as long as he and the people remained faithful to God, David’s kingdom would continue forever. And so the Israelites expected greatness to follow and at first it did. Under David and his son, Solomon the kingdom of Israel grew and flourished. Until some of David’s ancestors and the common folk started worshipping foreign gods. As a punishment God divided Israel into two kingdoms: the northern kingdom of ten tribes continued to be known as “Israel” and the southern kingdom of two tribes was called “Judah.” About two hundred years later the northern kingdom was attacked and defeated by Assyria. The captives were transported throughout the Assyrian Empire and eventually disappeared off the face of the earth. Jeremiah now prophesies that a new world power, Babylon will soon defeat the remaining tribes of “Judah.” David and Solomon’s grand kingdom has been whittled down by Assyria and soon will be entirely cut down by Babylon. Jeremiah, however, looks forward to better “days,” but for now all he sees is a dead stump. “Judah” is about to become an insignificant nothing – a joke, because “Jerusalem” would soon be destroyed, her people carried into exile and their captivity would end “David’s” ruling dynasty.

Yet out of this joke, this ‘has been’ nation, Jeremiah sees something new arising. A TWIG or “Branch” is going to shoot up which will save “Judah” and rule again with “righteousness” and justice (v.16). This “Branch” is unmistakably Jesus Christ who according to His human nature was “from David’s line” (v.15). Imagine God’s one and only Son coming from this stump of a nation – “Judah.” Why? Because God had promised Abraham that through his offspring “all peoples on earth (would) be blessed” (Genesis 12:3) and God enjoys elevating the lowly (Luke 1:52).

Think of how God implemented this plan: Jesus Christ, His Son, King of the universe is born – through the womb of a humble, Jewish virgin... as a spitting and crying Baby... in a dark and dirty stable ...in an obscure village called “Bethlehem.” Regardless of what you and I may know now, this was not an auspicious beginning. In his best seller, “All I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten,” Robert Fulghum, a Universalist minister ends a section about Christmas by saying, “What’s the big deal about this infant in a manger thing. Babies and stables both stink. I’ve been around both and I know. Bethlehem is a pit according to those who have been there.”

We may not like Robert Fulghum’s choice of words, but they are true. God did not choose the rich and famous for the birth of His Son. Instead God used His Son to elevate the poor and insignificant.

With His Son’s birth – God brought honor to Mary and all women and value to children.

With His Son's birth – God brought heaven to a manger and glory to the tiny village of Bethlehem.

With His Son's birth – God kept His promises and “saved” not only “Judah” & “Jerusalem” (Jeremiah 33:16), but also you, me and the entire world.

Thus God changed our perspective about Mary, babies, mangers, Bethlehem and Bible prophecies so that now we sing songs about them. Later God would elevate a despicable crown of thorns into a crown of glory and save us by it. God drapes the sparking GARLAND of His holy purpose on the most insignificant things. Christmas, Good Friday and Easter remind us of how beautiful God's designs can be for that which the world so easily rejects. God truly uses, “the lowly things of this world and the despised things...to nullify the things that are” (1 Corinthians 1:28).

2. By Using Failures. God also uses failures for His own purposes. Consider Jeremiah's prophecy about the future of “Judah.” She had a past of greatness. She was *the* world power under Kings: David and Solomon and she had the potential to be great again. That “Judah” would soon be reduced to a sprouting stump from so great a tree is a mark of terrible failure. Even the word used here, became synonymous with failure. The word “branch” (tsemach) is actually the root for the word “Nazareth,” the town where Jesus grew up. How clever of God to see to it that His Son, the “righteous Branch” grows up in “*branch* town.” Instead of this being a term of honor and distinction, it was a mark of shame to be from “*branch* town.” That is why when Jesus said He was from “Nazareth,” the people snickered and said, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth – (*branch* town)?” (John 1:45-46). Obviously, it could and did in Jesus' case.

It is important for us to know that God can also use our failures to accomplish His purposes. Here's an example. When he was seven years old, his family was forced out of their home because of a legal technicality. He had to work to help support them. At age nine, while still a backward, shy little boy, his mother died. At twenty-two, he lost his job as a store clerk. He wanted to go to law school, but his education was not good enough. At twenty-three, he went into debt to become a partner in a small store. Three years later his business partner died, leaving him a huge debt that took years to repay.

At twenty-eight, after developing a romantic relationship with a young lady for four years, he asked her to marry him. She said no. An earlier youthful love ended when his fiancée' died. At thirty-seven, on his third try, he was finally elected to Congress. Two years later he ran again and failed to be re-elected. It was about this time he had what some today would call a ‘nervous breakdown.’ At forty-one, adding additional heartache to an already unhappy marriage, his four-year old son died. The next year he was rejected for Land Officer. At forty-five, he ran for Senate and lost. Two years later, he was defeated for the nomination of Vice President. At forty-nine, he ran for the Senate again...and lost again. Add to this an endless barrage of criticism, misunderstanding, ugly and false rumors and deep periods of depression and you realize it's no wonder he was snubbed by his peers and despised by multitudes hardly the envy of his day. At fifty-one, however, he was elected President of the United States, but his second term in office was cut short by his assassination. As he lay dying in a little rooming house across from the place where he was shot, a former detractor – Edwin Stanton said, “There lies the most perfect ruler of men the world has seen... and now he belongs to the ages.” Of course, this tribute was spoken of Abraham Lincoln. A man whose failures God used to create one of the most inspirational and highly regarded Presidents in U.S. history; a man whom God used to free an entire race of peoples and to hold the Union together.

Do you know the pain of failure – with a particular sin or on the job or at school or within a relationship or when dealing with family members? What I'm about to say won't make your problems melt away, but it will help. God promises, “My grace is sufficient for you” (2 Corinthians 12:9). God's “grace” conquers the anger you & I feel at ourselves and others due to our failure. God's “grace” reveals our need to trust Him in every aspect of our lives instead of striking out on our own. God's “grace” strengthens us to cope with the disappointment and bitterness of our failings. God's “grace” gives us the ability to pick up ‘the broken pieces’ and to use them for our good. God's “grace” empowers us to be forgiving and gracious to our detractors when we realize how much God has been forgiving and gracious to us. God's “grace” reminds us that you and I may have given up on ourselves but God hasn't. He still has His purposes for us. The fact that you are here today to hear God's Word is proof that He is preparing you for His purposes – tomorrow. I don't know what they will be, but this much I do know that God's “grace is sufficient for you” (2 Cor. 12:9). And “His compassions never fail” (Lamentations 3:22).

Today we learned from Jeremiah 33 how God uses the insignificant and failures for His holy purposes. Why is that? Because God loves to wrap shiny GARLAND around fragile TWIGS – like you and me. Amen.