

**Of oaks and kudzu**  
**Ezekiel 17:22-24 & Mark 4:26-34; Pentecost 2; Year B**  
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**By The Reverend Barkley Thompson**

The driveway is long and straight. Stretching out from it are verdant lawns immaculately manicured. Like soldiers at attention, each blade of grass is trimmed to match its brothers. Not a dandelion is in sight. At the drive's far end rises a structure to rival the palaces of Europe. The imposing façade is marble and brick, supported by a phalanx of Corinthian columns which draw the eyes upward as if to heaven. The mansion is stately, symmetrical, and grand. But even so, it isn't the house that is most striking. Rather, what captivates the mind and the imagination is the driveway. In addition to the pristine grounds, the drive is lined on both sides by towering oak trees, aged and strong. Think Tara or her sister plantation owned by Ashley Wilkes, which was actually called "Twelve Oaks."

The layout of the drive, like the layout of a traditionally-styled church, is designed to enhance the sense of order, control, and majesty. Who from the South hasn't visited one of the old plantations—we used to visit those around Vicksburg and Natchez, Mississippi, when I was growing up—and wistfully longed for the ordered, serene and peaceful life of which they are the icon? And no part of them underscores that life more than those massive oaks.

The people of the Bible had their own version of those oak trees, and they served similarly as symbols. In Scripture, rather than Southern oaks we read about the cedars of Lebanon. Indeed, today the prophet Ezekiel uses the massive and stately cedar as the very icon of God's kingdom. Ezekiel's world is in turmoil, with his people living in exile in Babylon and their homeland destroyed. But he envisions that age when the world will finally be conformed to God's hopes and dreams for it. And what does the world of Ezekiel's dreams look like? The prophet instinctively turns to the cedar. When God's will is fulfilled, he says, it will be as if a shoot from Lebanon's greatest tree is planted on Israel's highest mountain. That new tree will grow stately and strong, until it becomes the home for every flying creature and the shade for every beast. It will bear fruit for all people. The image is the same as that of those plantation oaks: It symbolizes stability, order, majesty, and control. The fulfilled kingdom of God.

But wait a minute...Let's dig a little deeper into our cultural and iconic imagination. Take the Hermitage Plantation in Savannah, for instance. The plantation is gone, though the oak-lined drive still exists (now part of a golf course, our own century's version of manicured order). When we walk down that drive, the trees recall an age of gentility, but if we allow the eye of our imagination to pierce the scene more deeply, we may also see the eighty—yes,

eighty—slave cabins that once existed in rows just beyond the oak trees. We may see the fields that existed as part of every Southern plantation, where stately majesty gave way to pitiless, back-breaking labor. We may see black families torn asunder, humanity sold like chattel, people whose crippling or death was remembered not in photo albums or church memorials but on ledger sheets as the costs of business. If we look deeply, we will undoubtedly see exposed a social system that approximated heaven for those who lived in the manor house but was more like hell for everyone else.

And so, Ezekiel's image may pose a problem. It is our human tendency, then and now, to reach for symbols of strength and order, like the cedar or the oak, especially in times of turmoil. But too often we use those symbols not to point to a hoped-for future reality that *all* will enjoy—which is Ezekiel's intention—but rather as a screen behind which we can hide. Symbols of order and stability become images that enable us to pretend the world most of *us* enjoy is the real world while ignoring the depredation that exists all around us. These symbols become like those oak trees at the Hermitage, allowing us to head toward the serenity of the manor house while masking the rows of slave cabins just beyond them.

Jesus knew this. Things were not so different in his day. As an inheritor of the prophetic tradition, it would have made sense for Jesus to invoke those stately cedars of Lebanon. But instead Jesus riffs differently on Ezekiel's theme. He says, "The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground is the smallest of all seeds; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs..."

Mustard plants are not particularly common around here, so let me offer another Southern image. This one is as imbedded in our cultural psyches as that of the plantation, maybe more so these days. In the late 1800s a plant was imported to the United States from Japan as an effective prevention against soil erosion, and by 1935 the Soil Conservation Service was encouraging Southern farmers to plant this botanical miracle with abandon. Bad idea. Within a couple of decades, the plant became known as "the vine that ate the South." It had a tendency to spread beyond the borders of where it was desired. It had a bad habit of overtaking anything in its path, fields, trees, you name it—a sort of horticultural "Blob". It was unpredictable, impossible to contain, and extremely difficult to kill once it had taken root. You, of course, know what I'm talking about: Kudzu.

Kudzu gives us an idea of what Jesus means when he talks about the mustard plant. Mustard was wild, scraggly, a nuisance. Beginning as just a tiny seed, it could erupt almost overnight into something that could not be contained. Unlike the stately and rooted cedar, the

mustard plant would spread out and change the entire landscape. It bore no respect for manicured gardens, overwhelming them with its disordered growth.

The oaks along plantation drives should rightly fear kudzu! Just so, the stately and ordered—but also veneer-thin—majesty of this world should rightly fear the kingdom of God. The kingdom, when it takes hold, grows in unpredictable and uncontrollable ways. It changes the landscape entirely. Have you seen it? Have you ever been in a place where the kingdom has taken root? Like kudzu, the presence of God spreads out and overwhelms every icon, every *idol*. Suddenly, where there was peace, peace is shattered. Where there was decorum and order, disorder reigns. And yet, the change is so obviously a blessing! When God's love grows, people trample the grass; they plow over the oaks, and they spread that life-giving vine to all those who have never enjoyed peace, comfort, and stability, who have never known the manor house.

This is true in spiritual ways and in material ways. Where the kingdom of God grows, good people *give up* their manor house pretensions and *give*: of themselves, of their prayer, of the material blessings they enjoy. They labor in love to change the very landscape of the world, to offer the mustard plant's solace, protection, and shade to anyone in their path.

And just as this is true in the *world*, it's also true in the *soul*. We hide behind images of stability and order *within us*, too. Within, we struggle mightily to arrange stately oaks so that we can avoid the turmoil—emotional, psychological, spiritual—that churns just beyond the trees. But the kingdom can grow within, too!

There is that wonderful chapter in *The Shack* in which the main character, Mack, is taken by the Holy Spirit into a wild and aromatic garden, a garden of flowers, herbs like mustard and, we can imagine, kudzu. He is struck that the garden is so much more beautiful, so much more brimming with life than the artificial and sculpted gardens he knows in his life. Slowly Mack realizes that the garden in which he walks with God's Spirit is his soul. Slowly as the novel wears on, it is the wild growth in that garden, allowed to expand freely, that overcomes the deep hurt and the turmoil Mack knows.

If we'll open the gate even an inch to the kingdom of God in the world *and* in our souls, its growth will amaze us. But don't think it will grow in a stately and ordered way, rooted to one spot. Here in this place, and here in this place [POINT TO HEART] it will overrun us. It'll be scary (like the movie "the Blob" was scary), but it will also overcome *our* deepest hurts *and* those of the world.

Here in this place, may we see beyond the oak trees, and may kudzu abound. *Amen.*