

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JUNE 13, 2021

EZEKIEL 17:22-24 | PSALM 92:1-4, 12-15 | 2 CORINTHIANS 5:6-10, 14-17 | MARK 4:26-34

In the early 1960s, the US economy emerged from a brief recession and began growing. It grew over a quarter. It grew over a year. Then it approached a decade of uninterrupted growth. In 1969, a group of economists published a set of papers under the title, “Is the Business Cycle Obsolete?”¹ Essentially, *Maybe we’ll never have another depression or recession or downturn. Maybe we’ll just have growth forever.* The economy went into recession the next year.

In the 1990s, the US economy emerged from a brief recession and grew for a quarter. Then it grew for a year. Then it grew for almost a decade. By the late 1990s, economists started publishing articles with titles like, “The End of the Business Cycle?”² Essentially, *Maybe we’ll just have growth forever.* One of those economists even went on a PBS talk show where he was asked if this was just another repeat of what happened thirty years ago. Wasn’t it possible the same thing would happen all over again? He responded, “No.” It did.

You don’t have to be an economist to understand why that idea of endless growth was so captivating. We love growth. We like the feeling that we’re moving in the right direction, making progress, getting somewhere instead of just languishing. We love financial growth, sure. But pretty much every other kind of growth, too. Educational growth. Physical growth. Emotional growth. Personal growth. To help you achieve that all that growth, you can take on a growth mindset. And if you aren’t growing fast enough, don’t say you have a weakness. Call it a “growing edge.” So that even if you’re not growing, you’re growing in your capacity to grow.

We often take that language of growth into spiritual and church settings, too. Sometimes it works really well. It’s good when people participate in education events and then feel like they’re growing in their faith. That’s great. Sometimes people try a new activity or take on a new responsibility and grow into it. That’s great. Our mission statement begins with the idea of growth. We “grow in faith through worship, learning, and serving together.” Sometimes growth can be empowering and inspiring.

But sometimes bringing the idea of growth into our life of faith can just be sort of weird. Sometimes chasing spiritual growth can become exhausting. Just lurching from thing to thing trying to make a connection. And church growth usually just turns into a numbers game. A couple of years ago, I was at some church meeting where someone said that things at their parish were just incredible, and they had experienced this amazing growth of new members. And so I asked, “Where are they from? How’d they get connected? What’s going on in their lives?” And this person shrugged and said, “I’ve actually never talked to any of them.” Sometimes growth can be kind of hollow.

Those readings that you heard today are about growth. But not the kind of growth that we often think about. From the prophet Ezekiel, we heard the promise of God’s new planting high on the mountaintop. The prophet was writing to a group of Israelites living in exile. Jerusalem is destroyed. The Davidic line is a mess. There doesn’t seem to be a lot to work with. But God

¹ Robert Aaron Gordon and Social Science Research Council (U.S.) Committee on Economic Stability, *Is the Business Cycle Obsolete?: Based on a Conference of the Social Science Research Council Committee on Economic Stability* (Wiley-Interscience, 1969).

² “The End of the Business Cycle? | Foreign Affairs,” accessed June 8, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/1997-07-01/end-business-cycle>.

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promises to take a little twig and plant it on a mountain. And on top of that mountain, it will grow into a large cedar. For Ezekiel, growth is about restoration, fulfillment, and renewal.

And from Mark's gospel, we heard the famous parable of the mustard seed. The mustard seed was an infamously small seed, just about the smallest any of Jesus's listeners would regularly come across. But it can turn into something much larger than you would guess just by looking at it. In fact, if you've been to the Holy Land or just seen pictures, you can see entire fields around the Sea of Galilee that have been taken over by mustard seeds. It grows easily, seemingly overnight. For Mark, growth is resilient, persistent, and deceptively quick.

At first glance, those images don't seem to have a lot in common. One is a majestic tree. One is basically a weed. But notice what else is in both of those images. In the Ezekiel reading, the twig grows into a mighty cedar not just for its own benefit, but so that "under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind." The image isn't just a tree that's impressively tall, but a tree that provides a new environment for all kinds of creatures. In the historical context, the point is that the Israelites' redemption won't be just for their own benefit but for the benefit of others. There's no room here for superiority or exceptionalism or triumphalism. When God gives growth, Ezekiel says, it's for the benefit of all.

And there's something similar in today's gospel reading. The point of the mustard seed isn't just that it goes from a small seed to a big plant. Jesus says that it "becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." Again, the image isn't just of a plant that grows quickly like a weed but of a renewed environment for all kinds of creatures.

Ezekiel and Mark both promise us that God makes new growth possible. That the world can be transformed and renewed and changed. But that growth is never just for growth's sake. They point us to the divine promise of growth in God's promises, but they also force us to ask what that growth is *for*.

When growth tends to become dangerous and destructive is when it becomes a means to its own end, when we seek growth for the sake of growth. And when we focus on growth for its own sake, growing for the sake of growth, we tend to turn in on ourselves. We forget what we're actually growing for. Do we want GDP to go up because we want workers to have access to stable and fair employment? Or are we just rooting for line on the chart to go higher? Do we want personal growth to help us live out our vocations in the world? Or are we just padding our CVs? Do we want growth in the church because we want people to be inspired and strengthened by the grace of God? Or are we just looking for people to subsidize our experience?

When Pastor Kimberly Vaughn was here last year, she made a comment that gets right to the heart of these readings. She was talking about congregations, but you could apply this to a whole bunch of different things. And said something to the effect of, *If you want to measure how you're growing, don't think in terms of your budget. Don't think in terms of your membership rolls. Don't think in terms of any of that. Think in terms of how deeply you touch people's lives. Think of what would change for people in your community if you weren't here.* To put that in the language of today's readings, don't measure your growth by how tall you get. Measure your growth by how much shade you give.

God promises us growth, but it's a different type of growth than we're used to. Not growth to glorify ourselves. Not growth to become superior. Not growth to get us ahead of everyone else. But the kind of growth that provides respite for all God's creatures. The kind of growth that bears fruit. The kind of growth that makes us the greatest of the shrubs. Not always terribly impressive in the forest, but precious in the eyes of the sparrows and in the eyes of God.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481

(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG