

June 17, 2012 – Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Ezekiel 17:22-24; Psalms 92:2-3, 13-14, 15-16; Second Corinthians 5:6-10; Mark 4:26-34

Today's readings encourage us to think about God's great creation. Ezekiel's words describe how God plants a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar on a high and lofty mountain so that it might "produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar." These words immediately take me back to my days as a lay missionary living and working in the Petén, a jungle region of Guatemala, and witnessing the abuse of the forest land that surrounded our municipality.

I remember a friend of mine who worked in Guatemala City telling me how disappointed he was when he traveled through the Petén. He was looking forward to seeing the jungle, but instead he was shocked to see the deforestation and erosion along the sides of the road everywhere he traveled. While visiting remote villages I was able to stray from those main roads and walk through paths or boat through small rivers where I could marvel at tall and noble trees (cedars, pines and mahoganies among others), but I knew that what my friend had witnessed was a process that continues to this day.

Several times a year while traveling to the villages I would encounter land clearing equipment and lumber trucks, taking especially the mahoganies to ports, where they would be shipped to Japan and other highly developed countries. This extraction was often illegal, but somehow army officials who were supposed to be policing the area looked the other way when the trucks passed.

In one village where I was meeting with the women's group, I decided to ask them about the changes in the environment they experienced over the last 10-15 years. Their stories were beautiful; often with tears in their eyes they spoke of birds that once flew through their hamlets and how they now had to travel far into the jungle areas to hear their songs again. They spoke of medicinal plants that were once easy to access and now required great journeys to find. They spoke of how the soil was drier and how much harder it was to get certain things to grow.

Yet the readings today tell a different story, a more hopeful story of how a tiny sprig, or even a tiny seed can grow, bear fruit and stand in majesty. This is true, says Jesus in today's parables, of the kingdom of God. Imagine, just tossing seeds on the earth and without knowing exactly how, seeing them grow over a period of days. Jesus also speaks of the mustard seed – so tiny but one that becomes one of the largest plants where birds can dwell in its shade.

This growth that Jesus spoke of is not the overgrown growth of the developed world, but a growth that depends on humans working with the natural world to produce just enough of what they need to survive. It's this sense of co-habitation that makes the stories of today's readings work, and that make us pause and take a deep breath when we're in the presence of a magnificent cedar towering over us. Somehow the women in the remote villages I visited in the Petén knew this wisdom. They have so much to teach those of us in the developed world who still need to hear their stories.