Ezekiel 17:24c “I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it.”

How did this happen? I am going to bet that most of you at some point in your life have asked that question. In this case, the “this” I am talking about is this church? How did St. Paul Lutheran Church come about? How did it happen to be here in Mayville (or wherever your church is at and called)? How has it survived? How is it that for so many years it has been so blessed? How, how?

If we don’t give it much thought, we may immediately begin our answers to those questions with how our descendants got together and formed the congregation way back in 1871. How they worked hard and on and on. Or how the next generations did this and accomplished that…moved the church into town, expanded the building and so on. We might be tempted to go to our records and look at the people or the pastors and praise their names and hard work as the reason all of this is here.

Should we do that, we would be wrong! Oh, it is true, God caused people to be His instruments. God used faithful pastors and faithful members to accomplish his desire and achieve His purpose, but make no mistake, in all of this the people were no more than instruments. Think of that illustration, that we, God’s people, are his instruments. If you went to a concert and heard a beautiful violin piece that just moved you to be filled with wonder, would you praise the instrument or would you praise the musician? We would praise the musician. God is our musician and we are the instruments of his concert. We might be the sweet violin or the booming tuba. Perhaps we are the tapping drum or the sharp claves. It doesn’t matter what instrument you are, what actually matters is how you are used and what your function is. Again think about it. In a concert, does the trumpet section just do what they want, play in any key, keep their own tempo and so on? Does any instrument get to do that? It would be chaos. No each instrument is used as the musician follows the plan, keeps the tempo set and the result is a beautiful concert.

While it is true that we may have had a role, a minor one, the fact is that St. Paul is here and still here because of the grace and mercy of God. Because God planned our existence and God carried out His mission to bring the Gospel to the people of this place. It does not matter what it was that took place: shortage of pastors, disrepaired building, splits because of…, decline, growth, whatever: God gets all the credit and glory.

The Israelites of the Old Testament were soon to hear this truth, well actually, they were soon to experience this truth. Let’s consider our text this morning and do so under the theme: **God, Our Help and Strength.**

Ezekiel was a prophet during the times of the Babylonian Exile. Understand what took place. We will back up 100 years or so before Ezekiel. At that time God had warned his people of their godlessness. The Lord pleaded with them for repentance and a return to his grace. The people did not listen. Because the Northern Kingdom of Israel was years ahead in godlessness, they were the first ones that God acted on. God had the kingdom of Assyria come in and carry them away. That nation and its people, 10 tribes of the Jewish people were lost. Absorbed into the world never to be seen or heard of again.

Following this judgment of God, God continued to send his prophets to the Southern Kingdom of Judah, to plead with them to repent and return to the ways and truth of the faith God had given them. This they did not do. When the Lord was ready, he caused the Babylonian Empire, which had defeated and carried away the Assyrians, to now defeat and carry away the people of Judah. But because of God’s promise of eternal life and salvation through a Savior who would come from the tribe of Judah, God had told his people that this exile would only be for 70 years. He would see to it that they would and could return to the land of Israel as his people but things would be radically different.

For the royal family of David, the kingdom was lost, no longer would the Jewish people rule themselves under the house of David. It was all a big mess. The temple of Solomon was destroyed, Jerusalem was leveled. In many ways, the face of Judaism was forever changed and so were they as a people. The country was in shambles just as God had said would be.

Involved in this mess was Ezekiel, prophet of God among the exiled people. He gave them God’s counsel and direction. He gave them God’s promise that the Lord God was in charge. As a part of what God spoke through Ezekiel is the promise before us. It is a promise of what God would cause to be. The prophecy said, **“This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear much fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of it branches.”**

What beautiful words. A shoot, a sprig from the top of a cedar would be taken and planted. The shoot was a promise of Jesus. The cedar represented the people of Judah and reference to the shoot taken from the top of the tree was a symbol of the royal family. But understand that in the real land of Judah, all the majestic cedars had been cut down. Recognize that the royal family, it too had been cut off and for centuries there would be no king or really any kind of royal privilege. And yet, God says that he is going to take a shoot, plant it so that it will grow, plant it on the heights meaning it would be very visible and important. This shoot would become a most splendid cedar. A tree that will spread out, bear fruit, yes, every kind of bird would find shelter and shade in its branches.

Dear people, here is the promise of Jesus and his kingdom of the Holy Christian Church. Jesus is the shoot. The remnant of his people Israel, a descendant of the royal family. This shoot will appear and because of what this shoot will be, the people of the world will find shelter and safety as they nest within His branches. Here is the promise of Jesus and his church. Here is the salvation of the Lord given for the world.

I must say that this prophecy is so interesting. First, please note the mixing of the elements of this prophecy. Mostly it speaks of trees, of a sprout and sprig or branches. This is no doubt done so that we understand this prophecy of a Savior is of and from the Jewish people. It is a fulfillment of promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is a reminder that all of what God says is true. Jesus will be Jewish. He will be of the house of David yet his accomplishments will be known and visible to the whole world. And note then how birds are spoken of. Those birds represent all the other people of the world. Every people of the world can rest in Jesus. Every people of the world will find shelter and rest in what Jesus will bring and provide. And honestly, I like the way that is done. It reminds us that Jesus is for everyone. It reminds us that every single person who rests in Jesus, who puts their hope and life in him has the blessings of what Jesus will do. And isn’t that the very definition of the Holy Christian Church? “All those everywhere who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior from sin.” God didn’t need to reveal himself to different people in different ways. God didn’t need to establish hundreds of faiths for hundreds of people. God shows us that one, one shoot will become the place of safety and rest for the whole world. That one shoot is Jesus.

Need I remind you of what it is that Jesus will do? I don’t need to, but I will, because that is the very reason we gather for church. The message of Jesus as our Savior is vital to us. The message of sins forgiven because Jesus suffered, died, and rose from the dead for all the people of all the world is our lifeline and help. We gather, not just to give worship and praise to Jesus as God and Lord but we especially gather because this message of Jesus is so vital to our lives. We need to hear and be renewed regularly in this truth of salvation. We need to hear of our Savior and his loving grace. We need to apply the salve of his victory over sin to the wounds and sores that sin causes in our lives. This message of Jesus the Savior is our life saving water that quenches the thirst of the desert we live in.

But today, the most important message to make sure you get is found in our opening words but especially the closing verse here. They say, **“All the trees of the field will know that I the Lord bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it.”** First notice that we go back to the idea of trees. The trees mentioned here at the end are now the people of the world. Why are we? Why do we grow and survive or fade and die? It is because of the Lord. The Lord is the one in charge. The Lord is the one who grants life and prosperity. It is the Lord who determines our times and what blessings He will give.

Now I want you to understand that this applies not only to individuals but to everything and anything in the world. Your life and its path is determined by God. A business and its success, a church, a nation, you name it, and it is the Lord God who is in charge and determines what will be. Assyria rose and fell because that is what God decreed. Babylon rose and fell because that is what the Lord desired to serve his plan and purpose. Israel, the chosen people were picked by the Lord to be the people from whom His Savior would come, and yes, chosen to be the people who would show how easy and sad it is when God’s truth and wisdom are rejected and scorned.

And yes, churches and church bodies come and go because it serves God’s purpose and His plans. No Christian church anywhere exists apart from the goodness and grace of God. Recognize that churches disappear because the people no longer put their trust and hope in God and his promises but rather think the thing exists only and because of them. All we can do is proclaim God’s truth, cast out his seed and put our hope in God. He causes the tree to grow or die. He can dry up the green and make the dry flourish. It is God’s power, goodness, love, compassion and truth that is the measure of all.

In your life, what is your hope? Is your nest in Jesus? Is your comfort and hope his redemption and victory or do you think it is about you? Is your soul and your church found to be nested in Jesus? A place where the wonder of eternal life and salvation is boldly proclaimed, where your sins are laid at the cross and your hope refreshed at the empty tomb of Jesus? Are you rejoicing in the wonder and marvel of the power of God’s Word and how it can grow and flourish? Are you the instrument that the Great musician can play to His glory or are you the trumpet trying to blow itself and write its own score and song?

I pray that we be a people and a church that always knows that the Lord is our Hope and Strength. With Him we can never fail. Without Him we can never succeed. God is our everything! Amen.