

*6 I planted. Apollos watered. But God gave the increase... 2 as newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the Word, that with it you may grow... 18 But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and forever. Amen. (WEB)*

First of all—I want to say that I THINK I remember getting some of these ideas or thoughts elsewhere—from a book or a story or somewhere like that. I can't remember. Still, when an idea isn't totally mine, I always want to share that with you. I'd give credit where credit was due, but my memory is just too fuzzy.

Do you know what a bonsai tree is? It is a miniature tree in a pot—but literally “with a twist.” It is a great conversation piece because they are just like any old, craggy tree—except instead of being 40 or 50 or more feet tall—they are 3 or four feet or even just a foot or less tall. The trunks are bent and twisted like trees on a windy slope—some of them look like the live-oak trees down on the outer banks. Have you ever seen one of these—only about this tall [indicate] and yet looking like a 200 year old tree?

Do you know what the most interesting thing about them is to me? They are literally regular trees—not some special genetically-altered or specially bred tree. They begin with the same growth potential as any other spruce or pine or maple or oak. And no, they aren't given a special hormone or anything like that to stunt their growth.

One main difference is what they DON'T get. They don't get sufficient soil—they get planted in a small pot where their roots can't spread and grow. In fact, they are un-potted a couple of times each year and their roots are pruned to ensure that they don't grow into full-sized mature trees. Because of that pruning, they don't get much in the way of moisture and nutrients.

When they do try to grow too large, the gardener is supposed to stop the excess growth by pinching off leaves and branches. In fact, bonsai trees require quite a bit of attention and maintenance. They have to be pruned and shaped and bent and trained with wire.

They are trees. They look the part—they have the shape of trees and the leaves of trees and I guess they smell like trees. The main difference is that they are more-or-less useless. They are not practical—they were designed to be ornamental. I understand that some of the fruit trees actually bear fruit but it is small and tasteless. Birds can't nest in them. They can't shade your yard. And a tire-swing wouldn't work at all.

We talked about New Year's resolutions a couple of weeks ago and I've made a few. (And yes, they ARE going very well—thank you for asking.)

Today, I'm not going to make a new resolution, I'm going to make a wish—and a prayerful wish at that. It is my hope and prayer that you and I will always be REAL Christians and not bonsai Christians.

Let me read you Psalms 1:1-3: *1 Blessed is the man who doesn't walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand on the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers; 2 but his delight is in Yahweh's law. On his law he meditates day and night. 3 He will be like a tree planted by the streams of water, that produces its fruit in its season, whose leaf also does not wither. Whatever he does shall prosper. (WEB)*

God desires for you and me to be great willows and great cypresses and great oaks. He desires for us to live up to our potential as his children. He wants us to be giant hickory's, but too many of us wind up as stunted twigs with a couple of brown leaves.

When I look at us—and I mean Christians in general, not necessarily you and me—I see us as a forest of bonsai Christians. I don't know exactly how it happened and I don't even know WHEN it happened, but too many of our kind have failed to grow. We've become stunted and about as useful as a bonsai tree. We should be growing and be like giant oaks—proving shade and homes for animals.

Well maybe not that, but should definitely be growing and maturing and bearing fruit. We should be making a difference for those around us, but as a group it seems that we require as much care and attention as bonsai trees.

Oh, those trees are cute. But other than looking good, they don't really serve a purpose. I wonder if that might sometimes be said about us modern Christians?

A bonsai tree is shaped and pruned so that they LOOK old and wind-swept and have character that was shaped by the wind and elements. In other words, they are made to conform to an image of what a tree should look like.

If we are too busy cultivating a Christian “image” and trying to “look” rather than “be” then we may wind up as bonsai Christians. If we are too concerned with what we THINK we ought to be and what OTHERS think we ought to do and look like and be,—we won't allow God to shape us and use us according to who we are individually and according to the plans that he has for us.

We become bonsai Christians when we cling to our own understanding of what a Christian to be—shaped, of course by the opinions of others.

It is scary to let Jesus take the wheel, isn't it He might take us somewhere a Christian “shouldn't go” if we don't watch out. Remember he got himself in trouble over and over by hanging out in the wrong places and with the wrong people—places and people that tarnished his religious image. Remember though, as we sit in padded pews and as we conform to a Christian image—as we work hard to look and to be religious—remember that one of the biggest complaints about Jesus was that he wasn't religious enough! Jesus, the Christ, the holy Son of God wasn't religious enough to conform to “their” image.

I'm afraid that sometimes we work hard to fit into a religious mold so that God will be pleased with us. Maybe we sit and wait until we can finally conform ourselves into proper vessels—ones that are religious enough and good enough and pretty enough and knowledgeable enough and holy enough and pious enough to be used by God.

Besides, if we can fit the image perfectly, even if he doesn't use us, we will look good.

We will grow and we will be REAL trees and God will be able and willing to use us when we are religious enough, right? When we look Christian enough, right?

You knew that was a trick question.

We will be used by God and we will grow into the Christians he wants us to be and we will make the difference in the world he wants us to make when we really realize that he wants to use us now—as we are and who we are.

Speaking of trees—let's think back to Moses' call up on the mountain. Pretty powerful event, wouldn't you say? God calling Moses to free his people, speaking out of a burning bush.

So, I'm going to ask you to put on your thinking caps and strain real hard so that you can remember a little detail from the call of Moses in the book of Exodus. Close your eyes and put your hand on your forehead and think really hard, now.

What kind of bush did God speak out of?

Do you remember? Can you guess? Did Scripture tell us? Does it matter? Let me see if I can keep up with the questions and the answers: No, no, no, and no!

As you and I get ready to get ready to do something or be something for God—for the kingdom of God, we need to always remember that it wasn't the bush that was special it was God in the bush that sustained the flame and caught Moses' attention and it was GOD that empowered the whole thing.

Imagine a whole forest of bonsai trees living up on the mountain of God. In a pot. Shaped and trained—perfectly conforming to that perfect tree-image. And here God chose some BUSH! Scruffy and scraggly and all that. Who knows where it has been? Yet as we continue to see by reading the Bible—God chooses and God uses.

I know, I know, this is the first time I've mentioned this (or even the second or the third) but when we go back and really read it and look at what we find there, the most shocking message of the Bible is that God doesn't always choose the pretty or the ready or the shaped and the trained. In fact, it almost seems that he seldom does. Even more shocking is that he doesn't even always choose the most religious. He chooses those who are available and who are willing—even if they start out by arguing.

Sometimes it seems that we believe that being Christian is a matter of conforming to patterns of behavior and to a preconceived holiness. When we do that, we already know what we need and we already have the power we need—and we wind up keeping God at a distance.

When we already know what God wants and what we should be and what our jobs are—and when we are waiting until we get it all together, we may wind up quenching the power of God. God isn't WAITING until we are good enough before using us for something special.

We already have what he wants and what he needs—US! I'm speaking to us as individuals, but also as Zion Christian Church. I believe that there is a danger for Christians and Churches to be so sure of what is next and what God wants of all of us that we have no concept—and no real possibility of being surprised by God.

Now, let me add a disclaimer to that. I honestly believe that this church is one of the more open-to-God and willing-to-be-surprised churches I have been in in a long time, but of course there is always room for more—just like the old Jello commercial.

If we aren't ready and willing and EXPECTING to be surprised by God—then we aren't really listening to what he is saying in his word. Look at the stories God preserved for us! They should excite us with their messages. We should be astonished by what we find there.

Think about these things:

In the beginning, God created with a flourish—as only God can. Clouds and trees (real ones, not bonsai trees). Animals and birds and fishes. Creation was artistic and creative and wonderfully majestic in every way. And the culmination, the end of creation—the crowning glory of all this was when God took plain old dirt and created humankind.

Surprise!

God chose a barren old grumpy couple named Abram and Sari to give birth to a nation though which all history would be changed.

Surprise!

God chose to use an old man—a murderer and fugitive from justice—a prince who tended sheep and stuttered, to free the people of God from slavery. Along the way, he used a scrubby bush to reveal his calling to Moses.

Surprise!

God chose a teenager—one who wasn't even out of school yet—to nail a 9-foot mortal enemy of Israel right between the eyes. With a ROCK no less. Later, even after he pulls one of the biggest moral blunders of the Old Testament, David is still known as a man after God's own heart.

Surprise!

Jesus took the lunch of one child and fed enough people to fill a stadium—with enough left over for each disciple to take home a midnight snack.

Surprise!

Jesus revealed himself to prostitutes and beggars and lepers and Samaritans—and he ate with them and stayed with them and touched them.

Surprise!

And when it came time to call his top evangelist and author of much of the New Testament—he chose Saul, one of the biggest persecutors of Christians.

What a surprise that was.

One reason we Christians may be reluctant to let God control our lives—and our churches is that God really is unpredictable. We've just come through the Christmas season and there was NOTHING predictable about what happened there. God chose to send his Son. The Creator revealed himself to us by being born in a barn.

Surprise!

In fact that may be why the religious people of the day missed the birth and misunderstood Jesus' claims. Religion is predictable, sometimes painfully so, but God is unpredictable and sometimes that blinds us. It seems to have blinded the Jews all those years ago.

Let's don't let it blind us.

When Christians find themselves living dull Christians lives and going to a dull Christian church—it may be that we are bonsai Christians planted in a church that is a bonsai pot. If Scripture tells us anything, it tells us that when God is working, no one is bored and no one is complacent.

If that is where we find ourselves, we need to re-read, and re-listen, and re-think our purpose and even our faith.

I pointed out that Zion is special—and it is. One reason that is true is is your willingness to listen to the voice of God and to the voices of his people even when what they say and what they ask is not the norm—not predictable. Don't lose that willingness and that ability, ever.

Continue to always look around, Zion. Look at the possibilities, not the stereotypes and the expectations.

Whether it be concerts or coffee houses or gospel brunches or something else outside the norm—be willing to do something unexpected.

When we are willing to step outside that Christian box and do something unpredictable and surprising for the kingdom of God—maybe THAT is where we find real Christianity.

And maybe, just MAYBE we will find God is already there, just watching and waiting for us to get with the program—to get with HIS program for reaching our community and our world.

Maybe today God is calling you to make a decision of some kind. Maybe the Holy Spirit is guiding and leading that decision. Maybe this is the place God would have you serve—I can tell you that it is a great place to meet God and serve God and be surprised by God. Maybe this is a time to renew and rededicate yourself to God's work—it is close enough to the beginning of the new year to start a clean slate. Respond as God leads.