

SUMMER

SERMON SERIES - 2021

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Pentecost 3

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The Kingdom of God is like this. . .?

The Holy Gospel for this Day is from the Gospel according to Mark, chapter 4

Jesus also said, 'This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the land. Night and day, while he sleeps, when he is awake, the seed is sprouting and growing; how, he does not know. Of its own accord the land produces first the shoot, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the crop is ready, at once he starts to reap because the harvest has come.'

He also said, 'What can we say that the kingdom is like? What parable can we find for it? It is like a mustard seed which, at the time of its sowing, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth. Yet once it is sown it grows into the biggest shrub of them all and puts out big branches so that the birds of the air can shelter in its shade.'

Using many parables like these, he spoke the word to them, so far as they were capable of understanding it. He would not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything to his disciples when they were by themselves.

The Gospel of the Lord.

It is good to be with you today as you gather as communities of faith, either from your homes virtually, or gathered in-person following Health Directives. This morning, I would like to walk through the text with you. No question, the pandemic has denied us many things, but it also provides unexpected opportunities. So, this morning, rather than finding a pulpit to record what looks somewhat like a sermon in normal days, I'd like to take this opportunity to sit at a desk and walk with you through a brief Bible study. If you have a Bible nearby, I'd invite you to turn with me to the Gospel according to Mark.

We will center on one of the parables in our Gospel for the day, and listen together for God's Word for as we approach hopefully the last leg of our pandemic marathon, and as we experience the many other events happening in our lives and the lives of our community.

Let us pray. May these words of my mouth and the meditations and imaginations of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, Our Strength, Our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

As we open the Gospel according to Mark, keep in mind the Gospels, the synoptic gospels in particular, Matthew, Mark and Luke, come to us in a broad three-part narrative. Part One is the Prologue. The Prologue begins each gospel with a few chapters that gives a hint of what the narrative will be about. Then, Part Two is a large section that narrates Jesus one-year ministry in the northern area of Palestine: Galilee. Finally, Part Three narrates Jesus' week in Jerusalem, culminating in Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

This morning I will walk us briefly through the Prologue in chapter 1, toward our text that takes place early in the Galilean ministry.

As you turn to the beginning of Mark, you will find that the Prologue is very short—13 verses long. If you expect to find there stories of angels singing to shepherds, or wisemen following a star, you will not find them. Mark's gospel only gives us this. Jesus comes out of Nazareth in Galilee, he comes out of the north country far from the center of government, far from the center of faith at the temple. Jesus meets John the Baptist and is baptized. As the water runs down him, he hears the voice, "You are my Beloved son, I'm delighted with you" and the Spirit comes on him—which of course means, he is empowered to begin his mission.

As you read on, perhaps surprisingly, following baptism, the Spirit does not send Jesus into ministry but immediately "drives" Jesus into the wilderness where he is tempted by the Satan. Again, if you expected a long dialogue between Jesus and the Satan, in Mark you don't get it. As so often in Mark, the narrative is raw and unexplained. The narrative simply says this: that he was with the Satan and wild beasts for 40 days, and afterward the angels ministered to him.

As you turn past the prologue to Jesus' ministry in Galilee, Part Two starts with an important summary statement at 1.14. After Jesus comes out of the wilderness, he brings this message. **"The Kingdom of God has come near." Turn around and believe the Gospel.**

Of course, Jesus was not the only one announcing that the Kingdom of God, a new age, was breaking in. During this time in Israel of Roman occupation, with Roman soldiers everywhere, and Roman ways of living intruding everywhere—many saw the world at a point of crisis and looked for God to break in to bring in a New Age, the Kingdom of God. The Zealots called for a military insurrection to drive out the Romans and bring in the Kingdom of God, the New Age for Israel. They looked for a figure like King David, a Messianic general to be God's instrument. The Pharisees called for devotion to the Torah which would bring on the coming of Messiah to bring

in a New age. The Sadducees called for establishing the Temple and the proper line of priests to bring in the New Age of God's Kingdom. The Essenes called for leaving the evil world to set themselves apart and wait for two Messiahs--one military, one priestly—to come and bring in a New Age of faithfulness, the Kingdom of God.

Jesus simply states that this New Age, the Kingdom of God is near. Then he calls people to turn around and believe the Gospel. But there is no further explanation at this point of what this Kingdom of God that Jesus is declaring is all about. Of course, we will see it unfold, in quite unexpected ways, as the narrative goes on.

In the Galilean section what Jesus does first is to bring together a community. Still in chapter 1, verse 16, he walks by the lake and sees two fishermen working. He says, "Follow me and I'll have you gathering in people." The two fishermen leave their nets on the shore and follow Jesus. In the same chapter, two other fishermen do the same. Why do they follow Jesus? Again, Mark's narrative leaves that raw and unexplained. Simply, Jesus arrives and they find themselves following after him.

Later, the tax collector Levi, hears the call to follow Jesus. By our text, in chapter 4, there are now 12 disciples following Jesus. Others no doubt are part of the Jesus' community, but these are the 12 that go with him on the ministry journey.

They must have wondered, don't you think, these fisherman, these ordinary folk, what this Kingdom of God, this New Age would look like. Was Jesus calling them to a military uprising like the Zealots? Or was he preparing them to live in a religious cloister like the Essenes? Or something else entirely?

So, in Galilee the small band of apprentices, this community of Jesus followed Jesus—watching and listening. As you skim through the first three chapters, they watch him heal people—people broken in body, or in mind, or in soul. It doesn't seem to matter what sort of people they were. The coming of the Kingdom would be about bringing healing. The language of healing in their worldview was the language of casting out unclean spirits rather than our world's language of disease and bacteria and virus. But the ministry, in whatever language, was of healing of those broken in some way.

They also would listen to him teaching. In Mark, especially, Jesus does not 'teach' in long sermons. Instead, he teaches them in short parables. Again, these are usually raw and unexplained.

Our text today in chapter 4 beginning at verse 30 is one of these. Jesus begins, "**With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?**" The little church of Jesus must have leaned forward at the words: the Kingdom of God. So, this is what the new age will look like? This is what we are getting into. They leaned forward. . .so do we.

The text continues: **“It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth.”**

Mustard seeds in that time and place were proverbially small. Remember Jesus statement in one of the Gospels to disciples, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed you could move mountains.”

The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, a tiny little nothing. Mustard was used then and now for seasoning. Sometimes it was planted. But, apparently, often mustard wasn’t cultivated. It spread like a dandelion, and you often got it even if you weren’t looking for it. It was perhaps, not the most elegant of seeds.

Our text continues. . . **“yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs.”** What an odd image: One might have expected something akin to the saying: “mighty oaks from little acorns grow!” From small beginnings come glorious elegant oak trees. But that is not our parable.

Black mustard itself is an herb, not a tree. It might grow to about 6 feet high. Then stem of the plant grew to maybe an inch thick. But listen, the mustard seed grows, Jesus says, into the greatest of all herbs. It becomes more like a ‘shrubby.’ I know, if you, like me, have a Monty Python memory, you might remember what the Knights of Ni demand when King Arthur’s knights desire to have safe passage: “We want a shrubby!” Sorry, back to our text.

Listen. The shrubby **“puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”** So, this inelegant seed, tiny, common seed, that grows unexpectedly into a shrub, gathers the birds of the air and they make their nests in its shade.

What a fascinating image. What does it mean? Of course, in Mark, Jesus does not offer an explanation of what the parable means. It is left for us hearers to listen and to consider the parable together. So let’s do that.

Let’s listen together to this odd little parable. I wonder what it sounded like to the early disciples who were wondering about what this “Kingdom of God” Jesus was announcing might look like. Who were wondering what they might be called to do and to be.

The Kingdom of God, this New Age that Jesus is proclaiming, Jesus says, looks like a mustard seed—a tiny, inelegant mustard seed. I think that the little church of Jesus must have nodded. They were mustard seed people. Who were the first disciples? The rich and famous? Hardly. The faith community began with four fishermen. Then a tax collector who was reviled by his own people for ‘selling out’ to the Roman overlords. Later an ex-revolutionary, Simon the Zealot. Mustard seeds, each one.

But not only the first disciples nodded. The Apostle Paul would write this to the early church in Corinthians, in 1 Corinthians 1: “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many of you were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are” This New Age would come from Jesus’ mustard seed people.

What about the shrubbery? The little mustard seed that grew into the greatest of herbs, even a shrub. That also doesn’t sound very elegant, either. But you know, as the days passed for this little church of Jesus, they might nod their head at that too. If you turn to chapter 4 in Mark, just after our text, you will find the story of the storm at sea. What do the courageous disciples of Jesus say when the storm hits the community unexpectedly? “Don’t you care that we are perishing here.” Interestingly, in Matthew’s version of that story Jesus calls his disciples “You of little faith”—the Greek work *mikropistos*, you of Micro-faith.” But in the Gospel narrative the little church of Jesus saved their most embarrassing moments for later. Turn to Mark chapter 9 verse 30. Here, Jesus confides in the disciples the hard word that he is now on the way to Jerusalem where he will suffer and die. In the midst of this word so full of sadness from their beloved rabbi the disciples do what? Look at verse 33. They had an argument on the road about which one of the disciples was the most important.

Of course, as you know, the inelegance, the feet of clay of the church didn’t stop then. When I was teaching a class on the history of Christianity at the University of Regina some years ago, I always wanted to apologize to the students for the way Christians have literally gone to war against each other both sides claiming God was on their side. Each of you likely knows stories of a church in all its human frailty in your own experience. Family members disowned because Lutherans turned Catholic, or because Catholic turned Lutheran. Burials denied because of unpaid benevolence. You know the stories. They are hard stories.

But here is the thing. Jesus says, “The Kingdom of God is breaking into the world through his shrub, this little church of 12 disciples, this little, human, inelegant church. The shrubbery, “puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.” Again. The shrubbery, “puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.” William Willimon, longtime chaplain at Duke and author writes this. *In the eyes of the world, the church looks rather pitiful and paltry. Our discipleship, though perhaps earnest, is not that impressive in the eyes of the world. And yet, for all our flaws, the church is the body of Christ, the form the risen Christ has chosen to take in the world.*”

Let me tell you a little story about that. It happened, more years ago than I want to admit, when I was a young pastor serving in a rural community. The phone rang one day. It was the local undertaker. I knew him fairly well. He was a Mennonite. We had talked about our churches a number of times. I remember one long conversation about baptism, and what it

meant for Mennonites, what it meant for Lutherans. But this day, he called to say this. “Bill Johnson [let’s use that name for the story] died on the weekend. You may have met him.” I did know him by reputation. He was known as the ‘town drunk,’ that is to say, he was someone suffering from alcoholism more publicly than those who suffered from that disease privately. He continued, “Bill’s family, you may have known, disowned him decades ago. Every one of them. So, there is no one willing to handle his funeral. Now, we thought that, as a funeral home, we would donate the basic funeral for Bill. He was a human being. Would your community be willing to handle the church side of that?” So we did. He was a human being. We were followers of Jesus. So we did. I don’t know if it mattered to anyone in the town that day. I don’t think it made the newspaper. I don’t know if it mattered to his family. But I do know it mattered to our faith community. It mattered to me. Our little shrub had reached out far beyond itself, to give shade to one of the hurting birds of God’s world.

No, we are not perfect, not our people, not our churches. But how many have been gathered in by the community of Jesus in distress. Needing food. Needing a listening ear. Needing a place to belong. Needing love. Needing a gracious Word from God. And the little shrub that is the church of Jesus reaches out. Again and again and again.

“With what shall we compare the Kingdom of God” says Jesus. It’s like a mustard seed that grows into a shrub. And the birds of the air find shade in its branches.”

I leave you with this odd, beautiful story, to continue to turn over in your mind and heart as followers of Jesus have for 2000 years. I wonder what God is saying to you in this little parable. And I would leave you with this challenge. Though our faith communities may, in the eyes of the world, look insignificant, a mustard seed; though we may look—sometimes even to ourselves—like a gawky shrub; reach out those arms of Jesus into the world in whatever way that is your gift, in whatever way that is your calling; so that the birds of God’s world can find shade in your branches.

For the Kingdom of God is breaking into our world. Turn around, and believe the gospel. Amen.