

Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
Lutheran Church of the Epiphany~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía
Hempstead, New York
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The Third Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 6B – June 13, 2021

Ezekiel 17:22-24

2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17

Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15

Mark 4:26-34

Grace and peace to you, from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN

Do you remember the first time you experienced a seed germinating? Was it in the garden your parents or grandparents had in the backyard? Did you plant the seeds of a vegetable or flower and then carefully water them (“Not too much, we don’t want to drown them!” the adult with you probably said). And then, did you return, day after day, to the rich, black soil, to water a little again, and to look carefully, to see if anything was happening? And suddenly, one day, there was a little green shoot!

Did the appearance of the delicate, green leaves in the earth from a little, dry speck of a seed seem mysterious? That’s what Jesus was describing in the Gospel lesson for today:

[It] is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.

Mark 4:26-28.

This is what the kingdom or the realm of God is like, Jesus tells us. We can’t explain how the seed, seemingly lifeless, produces new growth, a new plant, a new life, from stage to stage, until we can harvest it. But the crop in life is a welcome, mysterious, miraculous gift of God. This is a glimpse of heaven on earth, the realm of God operating through the ordinary substances of our daily lives.

This is how God works in our existence, without our seeing what is happening, without our knowing, without our even having to do anything (other than planting

the seed and watering, if it doesn't rain), to generate all that we need for "our daily bread."

We, like Mark's first listeners, may be anxious, unsure of what will happen next in the world. After all, at the time he wrote his Gospel, the people of Judah had survived the uprising against Roman oppression, and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. They wondered, should they be revolutionaries, taking up arms against the Romans? Or should they be subservient to the Roman authorities and give in to get along?

This last year and a half certainly has been a time of unexpected and sudden change for us. For some of us, it has brought real devastation. We can choose to fight what our daily reality brings, or we can accept the option Jesus' parable presented: to trust in God's faithfulness to work out the age-old promises God has made to humanity. In taking this option, we recognize the story of God's action in the world, having taken the dramatically subversive action of introducing Jesus' life and public ministry on earth.

What are we called to do to bring in God's realm on earth? Well, we can exercise the faith with which God gifts us. Plant the seed, water it when there isn't rain. But more than anything else, to be patient for God's work in our world to unfold.

The partner to the parable of the seed growing in secret in Mark's Gospel is that of the mustard seed.

It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

Mark 4:31-32.

Now, Jesus injects a bit of humor with this parable. Mustard plants, although good for flavoring and preserving food, and useful for healing various physical conditions, were not planted as a crop in Jesus' day. It grew wild in Palestine, and once it was introduced in an area, it took over. And mustard plants didn't grow large. In fact, the Greek word in the parable that we have translated as "shrub" really is more appropriately translated as "vegetable." But that doesn't give us this

lovely picture of a full shrub with birds nesting in its shade. So Jesus used a bit of hyperbole to convey the message that God's realm is one where a common plant, grown from a tiny seed, becomes a rich habitat that welcomes and protects all sorts of parts of creation.

Jesus' message to us, as it was to his first listeners, is to participate in the realm that God has introduced to our lives. And if we have any doubt that God will continue to make the heavenly realm break into our earthly one, we need only look back millennia, to hear the word of the Lord through Ezekiel's prophecy:

I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar.

Exe 17:22-23a.

This passage recalls the time when, because the people of Judah hadn't been faithful to God, their attention had to be captured. The Babylonians did that by conquering them in battle, ending the line of King David, and deporting the healthy people of Jerusalem to Babylon to live in exile. Although the people were bereft in exile, they were once again paying attention to YHWH, their God.. They heard God's promise, to take the tender tops of cedars (representing the leaders of foreign lands) and to plant them in Judah. There they would root, grow into magnificent trees and bear fruit. That the leaders of Judah would be restored. That theme, or what today we'd call a "meme," was a familiar one from the prophets of the exile period. And under the replanted cedar "every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.' (Exe 17:23b.)

This word of God, long before prophesied, and carried out in the history of the people of Judah with the birth of Jesus in David's lineage, calls to mind the mustard "shrub" that gives sanctuary to all the people of the world. This is God's promise, the fulfillment of which we await, as we plant and water and harvest the crop that God gives us as our vocation. If we have any doubt, we need only recall God's message: "I the LORD have spoken; I will accomplish it." (Eze 17:24bb.)

In the generation after Jesus told his parables, Paul served as apostle, carrying the good news beyond the Jews to the other people of the Ancient Near East; Gentiles. He assures us that it is the love of Jesus Christ that empowers us to be faithful as we wait for God's action to be completely unfolded in our world. Through the power of God's Spirit in our lives, we come into trusting relationship with God and each other. We seek good for, and the growth of the others in our lives. Paul assures us: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" 2 Cor. 5:17.

We have been claimed by Christ as new creation, but while we are still on this earth, we must live through the struggles and pain of human life. But we have the comfort of the companionship of Jesus' Spirit through our days, as we plant seeds, watch them grow and then harvest the crop.

Let's pray. Dear Lord, transform us into beings who live and love like Jesus. Help us to surrender to your loving power so that we can be made new. Give us new vision to see everyone through the lens of your love for them. Move us to let go of old thought patterns and habits that are not life-giving. Open us to embody divine love to those we would otherwise deem unlovable. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen. (Adapted from Rev. Jennifer V. Pietz, Commentary on 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17 <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revamped-common-lectionary/ordinary-11-2/commentary-on-2-corinthians-56-10-11-13-14-17-5>)

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. C: Amen.