

Sermon - Proper 6, Year B
Growth in the Darkness
6/16/24

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the gospel of St. Mark this morning, Jesus brings to us an intriguing picture of this Kingdom of God. There is no litany of military might or wealth or even particular beauty, but instead - the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. The parable might be very familiar to us: this small, ordinary thing is tucked within the ground and loved into growth by God's good earth to become the greatest tree or shrub of all. Its large branches stretch toward heaven, and - in my very favorite detail of the story - the branches extend such that the birds of the air can nest in their shade. The Greek verb that is often translated "nest" or "perch" has a sense of completeness and homecoming within it. It is a word used in ancient letters to describe little children, snuggled up against the breast of their parents, abiding against a heart that loves them. The branches of the growth of God's kingdom are not merely places to stop and to rest, but places to come home.

It is tempting to simply equate the mustard seed with our own faith. It is a natural metaphor - a lovely one - and not precisely inaccurate, but the text teaches us that this seed is not just our own small efforts toward holiness. The seed here is not our faith, but the kingdom of God - our Creator who calls us into a perpetual homecoming, and who has given us his Son, Jesus, as that fruitful branch between earth and the Almighty. Our own faith may be a small seed or a large shrub or anything in between, but Jesus is the one who is always already strong and full of abundant life. This is the life we inherit in our baptism. No matter how strong or weak or young or old we may be, we are given this true and abundant life freely, by no work or skill of our own.

And how *fitting* that Christ should describe God's kingdom in parables. They can be tricky for us today, and they certainly caused the disciples no small measure of grief. The gospels often tell us that Jesus used these parables to intimate just the right amount of whatever it was that his audience needed to hear. We are reminded of the story of Moses in Exodus, where Moses descends from Mount Sinai with the tablets of the Ten Commandments. Upon his return back down the mountain, his face shines so brightly with holiness that the Israelites cannot bear to look upon him, and so he veils his face that he might be among them. In a sense, these parables of Jesus work similarly to bring his words into the world in a form where it is possible for us to look upon them. Our grammar is too weak for heavenly things, but we do know quite a bit about seeds.

Parables also demand that we *listen differently*. We do not listen to acquire information or to respond with our own expertise, but we are instead invited into a place out of time that is equal parts instruction, blessing, prayer, and creation. Parables are gifts, meant for us to touch and taste and savor, to hold close and ponder within the quiet places of our hearts. They are letters of love between us and our Christ that, though written across thousands of years, are continually, radically new. They are offered to teach us, but they are also offered to remind us that the language of grace is often much more simple than we had imagined.

The parable of the mustard seed ends with the large branches of the tree stretching outward toward the sky, and a primary lesson in this story is indeed the abundance of God and the homecoming that this kingdom welcomes us into. But there is another primary lesson here. It is all well and good to remember the outstretched branches, but we must never forget how much God loves the seed.

The seed is small. It begins in darkness. No one can see it, no one can imagine what it might or might not become. I remember gardening in school as a child, planting the little seeds for a basil plant or a tomato and waiting, waiting, waiting for something – *anything* – to happen. Worse, I remember the seeds of my classmates starting to grow. There was my friend with an egg carton full of fresh little green shoots, and there I was with a barren container full of dirt. I couldn't see what was happening. I couldn't have told you how or when the seeds would have mercy on my ego and finally spring up into the fullness of life. All I knew was that they were in there, somewhere, and all I could do was tend to the dirt and wait.

Sometimes in life, all we can do is tend to the dirt and wait. Sometimes all we can do is remember that **life begins in darkness**. Seeds begin in the ground. Children begin in the darkness of the womb. Resurrection began in the darkness of the grave. Even with the blessings of science, we cannot fully know what is unfolding in the ground, the womb, or the grave. Perhaps God will tell us someday, when we at last behold him face to face.

In the meantime, we have seasons of our lives where all we can do is tend to the dirt and wait. We can call on Christ, the one whom Mary Magdalene thought to be the gardener, to accompany us in our tending and our waiting. We can remember that the darkness of the dirt is a place for growing things. It is in these places of darkness where God is most vibrantly at work. Here is where the transformation begins. It is in our bleakest moments of despair and weakness when the strength of God is most powerfully revealed.

Don't be afraid of the darkness. Let it be what it is. Remember that God loves the seeds. And there will be a day, perhaps an unexpected one, when the waiting and the tending and the uncertainty and even the bleakness or despair will be cleared and there you will suddenly see the sweetness of life.