

PSALM 20

- ¹ The LORD answer you in the day of trouble!
The name of the God of Jacob protect you!
- ² May he send you help from the sanctuary,
and give you support from Zion.
- ³ May he remember all your offerings,
and regard with favor your burnt sacrifices. *Selah*
- ⁴ May he grant your heart's desire
and fulfill all your plans.
- ⁵ May we shout for joy over your victory,
and in the name of our God set up our banners.
May the LORD fulfill all your petitions.
- ⁶ Now I know that the LORD will help his anointed;
he will answer him from his holy heaven
with mighty victories by his right hand.
- ⁷ Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses,
but our pride is in the name of the LORD our God.
- ⁸ They will collapse and fall,
but we shall rise and stand upright.
- ⁹ Give victory to the king, O LORD;
answer us when we call.

MARK 4:26-34

²⁶He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

³⁰He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet 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."

³³With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

SERMON

The humble mustard seed. It's a favorite parable of Sunday school classes worldwide, and for good reason. It's an easy enough story to understand, the mustard seed, which is so tiny, although it's not the smallest seed in the world as Mark would claim, grows into a bush relatively large compared to it's tiny beginnings, although, again, not the largest bush in the world as the gospels state. In case you're confused on this point, it's important to note that the Bible never claims to be a science text book...which a good thing. Because while its poetry is lovely, its scientific claims are shaky and inaccurate, at best. But, inaccuracies of size and dimension aside, the parable of the mustard seed remains. A tiny seed grows into a sizable bush, and sometimes birds live in the branches. As with our yeast from last week, little things can go on to grow to be far larger than one might expect.

The tiny mustard seed actually makes an appearance in religious stories around the world. In Jewish writings, the universe is often compared to a mustard seed in order to remind us of our relative insignificance and impart humility upon us as humans. The Buddha, 500 years before Jesus, once told a story about a mustard seed. It goes something like this: a grieving mother lost her only son, and she brought his body before the Buddha, pleading for him to bring the son back from the dead. The Buddha asked her to go and gather a handful of mustard seeds from a family who had not lost a child, spouse, parent, or friend. The woman searched near and far, but of course she could not find a family who had never experienced loss. And so, of course, she realized that death is common to all people, and in her grief she is not alone. The mustard seed pops up here and

there in religious stories, sometimes representing the vastness of time and in other moments representing humility and smallness. And so Jesus is in good company when he reaches for this parable, “the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed...”

In this story for today, Jesus is responding to a question, we don't know exactly what the question is, because the Bible doesn't tell us, but we can reverse engineer it from the parable Jesus tells. He starts out, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?” and so we can work backwards and say, with some confidence, that the question must have been some variation on the theme of: What is the Kingdom of God? Or perhaps: Where is the Kingdom of God? Or even: When is the Kingdom of God? And these questions make some sense to us, because they're questions we're still asking today. Where and when and what and how and who is the Kingdom of God?

And so Jesus responds with two parables. The first goes something like this: the kingdom is a like a seed scattered upon the ground. The farmer goes to sleep and rises, day after day, and the earth produces itself. First the blade and then the ear, then the full corn shall appear, as the hymn goes (Come, Ye Thankful People, Come). And then the farmer drives out into the field on his International Harvester Combine, and by the end of the day those ears of corn are plucked, shucked, and sold for a buck.

And Jesus continues on: The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, such a tiny seed thrown upon the ground. But in time it grows and becomes a sizeable bush with branches for the birds to perch upon. In Matthew and Luke's account, Jesus includes the third parable the

yeast and the flour. A little yeast, hidden the flour, leavens the whole.

And so, what of these questions which may have been raised? First, when will the Kingdom of God be here? Well, as with seeds in the ground or with yeast in a dough, time is sort of a squishy phenomenon. The “when” depends so very much upon factors outside of a farmer or baker’s control. How much rain and sun will the plants get? How humid is the kitchen? And Jesus kind of answers this question for us in that line “the earth produces of itself.” When is the Kingdom of God? Well, it comes in it’s own time. We cannot hasten it’s arrival by poking at the bread dough or digging up the seed to check it’s progress. Seeds grow, bread rises, the kingdom of God comes in their own time. The farmer goes to sleep at night, they rise in the morning, when the seed will sprout, the farmer does not know.

And this answer then begs the next question. If the Kingdom of God comes in it’s own time, then where will it come? Where should we seek it out? And the people listening to Jesus would have probably expected something grand...right? Oh, the Kingdom of God will come as an army, opposing the Roman occupation! Oh, the Kingdom of God will be obvious, led by bands of angels with flaming swords and the Messiah at the head. And I think we would probably think the same thing, even today. We look for the arrival of important, powerful changes among the elite, the political, the famous. What new product will Apple announce this fall? What will the president say in his State of the Union address? With whom did the Pope meet? I wonder if we, too, look for the coming of the Kingdom of God in the headline of the newspaper, the lectern of the politician, in

the lens of a movie camera, or in the pulpit of the richest and prettiest church. But in these parables, stories of gardens and fields, kitchens and homes, I wonder if Jesus isn't saying exactly the opposite.

The kingdom of God is going to be found where we already are. The home, the market, the community oven, the field on the edge of town. The Kingdom of God is going to be found in the everyday, the ordinary places, between ordinary people. It will come when it comes, and it will be among us in our daily living.

And so, Jesus, then what are we looking for? What will the Kingdom of God look like? Well, it's going to look like the harvest of the field, brought in by the farmer's sickle. It will look like a mustard bush, birds perching upon branches filled with tiny seeds. It will look like 50 loaves of bread, baked from 3 measures of flour, coming out of the oven shared by a village of friends and neighbors. It will look like everyone having enough. Enough grain to share. Enough mustard seed to cook with, enough branches for birds to nest in. Enough bread for all to eat. The kingdom of God looks like enough to be shared among the community, and even more to be shared with the birds of the air.

In these parables of field and table, I hear Jesus turning the expectations of our world upside down. We're always looking and requiring ourselves to be precise and productive in our prediction of time, we have a tendency to look toward the powerful for instruction and example, and the concerns of our lives are so wrapped up in getting as much as we can for ourselves. And Jesus, with these parables, paints a picture that says, No. The kingdom

isn't about those things. The kingdom of God will come in its own time, it will come in mundane and ordinary ways, and it is not concerned with having more, it is only concerned with having enough. That's the provocation of these parables, and on this, World Communion Sunday, it's the provocation of the meal that we share. Ordinary, daily items, set aside through God's command, to be enough for God's people, gathered here and gathered around the world. And in that, we receive the body of Christ, so that we may be blessed and called to then go out, seek the kingdom of God in this world, and participate in the work of making sure there is enough bread, enough branches, enough seed for everyone to share. Thanks be to God.