

4th Sunday After Epiphany - January 21, 2024

Mark 4:1-34 - Comparing the Kingdom of God

As we heard during the past couple of weeks, the opening chapters of Mark are fast-paced and thrilling. Today we arrive at Mark's fourth chapter. The narrative pace slows down noticeably. Jesus often teaches by the sea or from a boat to allow the crowds the opportunity to hear. Water transmits sound well, so Jesus often uses a boat to transmit his voice. The slower pace in this chapter gives way for room to reflect on what has happened so far. Just who **is this** Jesus at the centre of all the action?

When Jesus spoke to the crowds or to his disciples, he spoke in parables - an understandable relational comparison. He would often question his disciples, "Do you not understand this parable?" Place yourself in the disciples' sandals. They were simple, ordinary people, with a limited education - fishermen from small villages.

These ordinary fishermen were not stupid, they were simply naive and uneducated, along with most of the crowds that came to listen. This is why Jesus used relational stories which began, "it is like leaven" or "it is like a mustard seed." The people understood how leaven made bread dough rise. Jesus was a teacher who tried to develop his disciples' ability to reason. The disciples were yearning for a higher level of understanding, and Jesus took the time to teach

them, to explain to them and the crowds that followed – the kingdom of God.

"With what can we compare the kingdom of God?" Jesus provides specific parables by which to imagine the nature of and truths about the kingdom of God. Parables offer us a lens through which to view certain concepts of faith or a means toward glimpsing God's activity in the world. Jesus' chosen metaphor for God's reign is seed. Why compare God's glorious kingdom to displaced seeds, seeds that birds consume, the sun scorches, and thorns choke and suppress?

Jesus tells parables not so much for explanation as for exploration; not so much for answers as to engage the imagination; not so much for certainties about faith as for discoveries about how faith works. Mark offers four parables today; the parable of the sower, the light and the bushel basket, the growing seed, and the mustard seed. A parable is intended to be disruptive, to interrupt what you thought you knew, not just *teach* you something, but actually to *confront* you with a surprising and often unwanted truth.

Parables are useful when the truth you want to share is difficult - whether difficult to hear, comprehend or believe. Jesus describes the coming Kingdom of God in parables because he knows the reality it introduces is unexpected, and that his hearers can't really

take it in all at once. Parables are, in this sense, like narrative time bombs. You hear them tick, wonder about them - tick - think maybe you've got it - tick - and then as you walk away - tick - or over the course of the next day or so - tick - and all of a sudden the truth Jesus meant to convey strikes home - boom! - almost overwhelming you with its implications, blinding you with its vision.

All three seed parables in Mark's Gospel have two things in common. First, they are about seeds, and the secondly, they are surrounded by the admonition to *hear*. Like seeds, the gospel can be easily overlooked and underestimated. All sorts of things in the world seem more powerful and important. Like seeds, the gospel conceals a surprise – for the gospel has the potential to grow into something entirely unexpected.

The Parable of the Sower plays a crucial role in the overall structure of Mark's Gospel. It's the central part of a whole in this crucial teaching of Jesus. First Jesus tells the parable and then he explains it. The narrative steeps us in a quiet agrarian context world, a world in which Jesus invites us to stop scanning the surface from afar and instead go up close with him to observe how a seed sprouts and grows. With Jesus' story of the Sower, we are presented with a sustained teaching of Jesus. This alone marks it as important!

Up to this point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus' ministry has met with opposition and rejection from religious leaders, misdirected enthusiasm from crowds, and misunderstanding from his disciples. So far, not a single person has understood — nor seems close to understanding — the Kingdom of God that Jesus is introducing.

The prospects of Jesus' mission look as precarious as the prospects of the Palestinian farmer. The hardpan, rocks, and thorns of the parable seem to symbolize the hard-heartedness, false hopes, and misunderstandings of Jesus' hearers. Nor do things seem to have changed much today. Anyone who prays earnestly for "God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven" cannot help but be distressed by the self-interest and hedonism, materialism and militarism, evil and violence, cowardice and compromise that imperil the gospel and Church today. The facts of first-century Palestine seem to be the facts of the twenty-first century as well.

The Parable of the Sower needs to be seen in this context. Rejection of the coming reign of God is answered by agricultural stories of the coming reign of God. Much of the soil on which the Sower sows the seed is not good soil. That's the problem. But, in spite of this problem, there will be in many hearts an exceedingly abundant harvest. The coming of God's reign is not a lamp to hide under a bushel. God's reign is a light that should show forth throughout the

whole world. “Anyone who has ears to hear should listen and understand.” This plea to listen is a key part of the story of the Sower and of Mark’s Gospel. The parable begins with an imperative: “Listen!” It ends with an imperative: “Anyone who is willing to hear should listen and understand.”

In the Parable of the Sower, a farmer sows seed widely and indiscriminately. Some of the seed falls on pathways, some on rocky ground, some among thorns, and some on good soil. Farming in Palestine was a hazardous livelihood, and the farmer sows unsparingly – even wastefully – in hopes of reaping a harvest. And according to the parable, three-quarters of the seed is lost to rocks, thorns, and the elements. Those are discouraging odds. But the parable, ironically, does not end on a discouraging note. Far from it!

Some of the seed falls on good soil, and it grows and produces a harvest of thirty, sixty, or a hundredfold. In a part of the world where a harvest of tenfold was better than average, that is a breathtaking harvest. It is no human harvest at all. A harvest so abnormally high indicates the hand of God. The irony is typical of Jesus’ parables, upsetting our expectations and stock responses. A farmer hoping to eke out a meagre harvest, at best, ends up reaping a bumper crop!

In Jesus’ interpretation of the parable it is clear that the parable is

told about different kinds of *hearing*. The Sower sows the word. Some hear and some don't hear. It may look for a time that no one is listening. But the harvest will come in incredible plenty.

There are some interpretations of this parable which put great emphasis on the soil ... We must be good soil! We must be good listeners! We must get it right! There is a bit of a problem here. A *promise has now been turned into a demand*. Soil, is a *passive* image. The soil will produce – not because it can make some Herculean effort, but because it is good soil and the Sower knows his business. This promise of a harvest is a promise of hope in Mark's story for those who listen and believe – a promise for the good soil people. We have heard and are called to believe that the promise will bear fruit.

We need to remember two things about this parable. First, the parable needs to be read as speaking about the Kingdom of God. It is, after all, God's work that the parable – and the Gospel – seek to understand. Second, the parable is interpreted as having to do with reception of the Word. The emphasis here is on *reception*. The emphasis in the parable is on what kinds of hearers we are. Hearing is *passive!* It does not depend upon human efforts! The kingdom comes through the work of the Sower and not through the work of the soil!

This is true of the Gospel writer, Mark, as well. His Gospel sows the seed. It doesn't end ... There is no ending to this Gospel. Just sowing. Sowing that ultimately falls upon our hearts. At this point we must simply trust the promise of the parable that the harvest will be plentiful in our lives and in the lives of all who hear. Faith comes through what is heard – through what is sown!

Once we have the plot synopsis of the Parable of the Sower, we ought to be on the lookout for people in Mark's story who are like these different kinds of soil. For the ancient reader/listener the suspense in a story was not about what would happen. They knew that from the plot synopsis. What they didn't know was how the plot would play itself out. The scribes, the Pharisees, the Herodians, and the Jerusalem Jews are examples of seed sown on the way, seed sown that Satan immediately takes away.

For the seed sown in *rocky* ground, the disciples make great exemplars. After all, Simon or Peter (named the rock), can be identified with rocky ground that represents the disciples. Rocky ground people respond *immediately* to the sowing of the word. When the first disciples were called, they *immediately* followed Jesus, but it didn't take long for them to start to fall away. So, Peter, James and John become exemplars of the rocky ground.

Driving through the west coast mountains for the first time a few years ago, I was fascinated by all the spruce and fir growing along the mountain tops, barely clinging to the rocky soil. Watching the trees got me thinking of this parable. Most interpretations think of seeds sprouting among rocky soil, quickly dying, not surviving. But I thought of the disciples who responded quickly to the sowing of the word. I think we can safely say that understanding and faith came to them slowly - but with a great, long struggle - just like the trees that sprout among the rocky mountains, yet through their struggle to survive, find great strength. They don't all make it - not all disciples make it. But those who struggle to understand, end up with a faith that is strong and unmoveable – maybe even stronger than that which started in the good soil – the easy soil – and never had to fight to endure – to grow.

The exemplars of those sown among the thorns are King Herod and the rich man found later in Mark along with perhaps Pilate who are sorry for what they are asked to do. They are prevented from acting on their better instincts by other things – the cares of the world, the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things that come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing.

And the good soil. These hearers are found in the next chapter of Mark's story – Jairus' daughter, a poor woman with a flow of blood,

and a leader of a Jewish synagogue – are people of great *faith*. In them the word produces thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and hundredfold. The chapters leading up to this parable tell story after story of the rejection of Jesus. The Parable of the Sower addresses this rejection and indicates that some soil is not ripe for the reception of the kingdom, but the day will come when an abundant harvest will burst forth. The next chapter of Mark chronicles the abundant harvest! All of a sudden, following the parable, people respond to Jesus and amazing fruit is borne.

The agricultural metaphor for the kingdom of God can be taken too far. The mystery of the kingdom is not agricultural but human. It is the human heart, not land, that is the seat of God's domain. The Sower of the Word liberally sows his seed on human hearts. Always, always, Mark's story ends in human hearts, in our human heart. The promise of the Sower is that this sowing will one day produce an abundant harvest in our lives. We are among those privileged to be called to sow the word on the soil of human hearts. We sow the word trusting in the promise of the Sower.

In his words to the disciples Jesus had said some things about who will hear and believe that are difficult to grasp. The Twelve, the insiders, can know the secrets of the kingdom. Those who are outside cannot figure it out. They see but they do not perceive. They

hear but they don't understand. The Parable of the Sower had begun and ended with a call to listen. That is true because what the Sower sows is the *word*. A word is offered to be heard. Faith comes through such hearing. This relationship between hearing and faith will be evident throughout Mark's Gospel.

This chapter is a long meditation on matters of sowing and harvest, and the sowing of the Sower is most certainly not in vain. Some seed falls on the path, some on rocky ground and some amongst the thorns. But other seed produces extravagantly: thirtyfold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold. The seed sprouts and grows even though the farmer doesn't understand the process at work here. In some instances the seed is very small. "Not to worry," says Jesus, "for from very small seeds come the greatest shrubs of all."

For a time, some people just don't get it. Some people are path people: Satan snatches the word they had heard from them. Others are rocky ground people; they follow immediately but they have no depth and they fall away when times of trial come upon them. Still others are thorny ground people: they hear the word with joy, but the cares of the world and the delight in riches choke out the word. There are also the good soil people; they bear fruit in manifold abundance. All is not lost! What is secret will come to light.

Different types of soils tend to be tied to different types of people. But what if the different soils are seasons in our lives that we all experience? The Word of God is poured out on us all the time, and sometimes it grows within us and sometimes it doesn't. The important thing to remember is that the sower is always indiscriminately throwing out the seed rather than carefully guarding it for only the best soil. Sometimes it is our life choices that put us on the footpath, or in the weeds, or whatever, with the message being crowded out by a desire for money and "other things." I think that sometimes we can be different types of soils on the same day! The point is that God keeps scattering the seed because he is a God of grace and mercy. Extravagant!

Mark uses Jesus' parable of the growing seed to comfort those in charge of guiding his endangered church. They were planted under adverse conditions. Mark's gospel was written in a time of high anxiety. Church leaders felt vulnerable and helpless. Although all three synoptic Gospels present sowing parables, they are particularly prominent in Mark. Seeds are small and vulnerable but can sprout and grow even in tough times.

A scruffy mustard shrub seems like an odd choice as a metaphor for God's kingdom when one could have chosen a magnificent cedar. Jesus' parables call his audience to expect the in-breaking of God's

reign into our ordinary daily lives. They also call us to remember that the kingdom of God has its own time and rate of growth. They call us to look beyond what we were to what we hope for.

Faith is constantly confronted with the fulfillment gap between the promises of Jesus and the reality of our faith-lives. Mark knew this very well. He presents Jesus as the One who must suffer. Mark's Jesus is the Crucified. Mark's Jesus is the One who reveals himself in dying on a cross. Mark knew that the Sower himself would one day be sown in the earth. And yet there is hope! Seed that is sown will spring forth and blossom even a hundredfold!

Amen.

PRAYERS FOR 3RD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY - JANUARY 21, 2024

Holy, holy, holy God, in calling forth creation from the void, revealing yourself in human flesh, and pouring forth your wisdom to guide us, you manifest your concern for your whole universe. You invite us, as your people, to gather the world's needs into our hearts and bring them before you.

We pray: For our local Christian communities and all Christian churches and ask for your help, Lord, so that one day they may be able to gather around the table and share the fellowship of holy communion: for those here present, and those who are absent from our assembly today.

For a deeper appreciation of our common baptism into the one body of Christ. Lord, sustain each of us and our communities as we continue on the path towards the unity you desire for all your disciples.

For our spiritual leaders and church authorities, that the Spirit may continue to enlighten them and grant them the grace to work in harmony, joy and love: for the Church and its leaders: Bishops Susan and Kathy, Anglican Primate Linda Nicolls, Bishops of the Moravian Worldwide church, all pastors, priests, deacons, councils, musicians, and lay leaders; for Faith Lutheran Church, Kelowna and Rev. Brian Krushel and Gloria Dei Lutheran, North Vancouver and Rev. Vida Jaugelis; for the congregation of San Juan Camino d'Esperanze and Pastora Ana Maria Jara.

For the Church: that we may recognize our call to be children of God, be united in fellowship through the Holy Spirit and encourage one another as we follow God's call in our lives: for a spirit of wonder and awe: that we may behold the marvellous deeds of God in nature, in relationships, and within ourselves and be motivated to serve God with greater commitment and sincerity.

For new vision and understanding: For a deeper appreciation of God's covenant of love: that we who were once "no people" have become God's own and that we may live each day as daughters and sons of God: for peace: that God will bring new courage to leaders of nations working for peace and ending injustice.

For the grace to live in peace and harmony: that God will help us accept the differences in one another, understand the gifts that others bring, and give us patience as we strive to work together: for a new experience of grace and mercy in our lives: that God's love will free us from our past failures, give us courage to make amends, and hope to begin again in our relationships.

For all who are isolated from God and the human family: that they may experience welcome and acceptance as they encounter the Christian community: for a greater sense of community: that we may appreciate the wonder of each person and work together to address the needs and longings of all who enter our lives.

For all who are discouraged, lonely, suffering and ill, that the Spirit of God's love will strengthen them and bring them to wholeness quickly: for all whose lives are disrupted by violence: For all who have lost homes and community and become refugees: that God will protect them, guide them to food and shelter and help them develop new relationships.

For all civil authorities. Lord, grant that they may work towards justice and peace, and give them the wisdom to attend to the needs of all, especially the most vulnerable: for all the nations and communities who live with deep divisions and internal conflicts.

For the healing of memories and wounds inflicted by early 20th century genocides of Armenian, Greek, and Assyrian communities, and for current tensions in these lands; for enhanced respect for all minority groups and their claims; for those who work for justice and reconciliation; for the people who struggle because of economic and political crises in these countries; for more stable democratic governments that further the good of all.

Holy, holy, holy God, fill us with strength and courage, with discernment and compassion, that we may be your instruments of justice and love in this world, that it may be on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen

God in Community, Holy in One, make us one Body from many, as we pray as Jesus teaches us, saying,

Our Father ...