

4th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 6.16.24

Ezekiel 17:22-24

Thus says the Lord God: 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. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind. All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the Lord have spoken; I will accomplish it.

Mark 4:26-34

He also said, “The kingdom of God 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. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? 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.”

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples. (327)

The scandal of this week’s gospel passage is that it’s going to happen anyway. No matter what we do, or fail to do, the kingdom of God will happen. It will grow and spread. Like mustard, it will take over everything, though having begun small, now everywhere. It will happen while we labor for it. It will happen while we sleep. It will happen because of us. It will happen on spite of us. It will happen irrespective of us. It’s really not all about us. So, relax—a little anyway. This is the reign of *God* that we’re talking about, after all. Who are we to think we could force it, or we could thwart it?

Someone has scattered seed on the ground—and I wonder who it could have been. In the language of Godly Play, I wonder who it could have been, the one imagined in the parable to have scattered seed on the ground.

Could it have been Jesus, he whose words were like seed, he whose mission was one of spreading—spreading healing, spreading God’s presence and power which upsets worldly power, undermines worldly power? I wonder if perhaps he was the sower.

Or might it have been the likes of us, Jesus' disciples, or we of Jesus' church? Do a little here, a little there, sowing grace, sowing kindness, sowing love, all like seeds. And then the seeds do what they do, which is a great mystery.

I mean, how do they do that? Seeds in soil?

This would make it so Jesus himself might be that seed—a thing buried in the ground which has it then rise, more glorious and life-giving than ever before.

Or perhaps we are those seeds, each of us, or each iteration of Jesus' church, the Monterey Church, the Church on the Hill. Scattered, buried; still bearing promise?

Or mustard? Are we that, something that did indeed begin small—the smallest of beginnings, a tiny, insignificant seed as our beginning, a crucified Lord; an illiterate, childless criminal, but not even a particularly impressive criminal, just someone who wasn't here to stand with the empire and wasn't here to stand with the Temple and wasn't here to join any particular cause but the cause of making present the reign of God, making it immediately present, this future thing, this ultimate thing whose breaking into time really does break a lot (this being a reign that doesn't easily fit), but who then died, but who though returned alive and said, "Peace be with you," to the disciples who might have been readying themselves for war but who would rather then grow like mustard, a plant you really *don't* want in your garden because, once it's growing, there's really no stopping it, and it uproots everything that is not *it*, eradicates everything that is the not mustard-cum-kingdom of God: could the manifold congregations of Jesus' church be the mustard? Invasive? Leaving nothing untouched?

Who's to say? Who's to say what the world would look like if the church had never taken hold? A lot has been done wrong in the name of the church. We could list them here. Who's to say how much has been done right? Who's to say whether the world is a better place for the event of Jesus Christ lying at the center of it all? Year 0, with time before and time since. Who's to say the time since hasn't been a long, slow unfolding of the reign of God, God's will done on earth as in heaven? The scale is small, but its effects might be manifold.

There are all these how-to church books. As the church flags in social influence, as its status fades and numbers dwindle, there is an abounding crop of how-to church books. Some of them are good; some of them are not-so good. It depends on who you ask and what they think the problem is. How to grow your church. How to increase the giving. How to move into the 21st century, which is now ¼ over so let's get with it, people. How to widen your mission. How to increase your impact. How to be relevant. How to structure your governance.

These can be useful.

The underlying message, though, is that our focus should be on technique, the technicalities of *how* we do church: maybe if we get it right, we'll grow again, we'll thrive again, people positively competing to become the chair of the Trustees, people bragging about being the head deacon.

I'll admit to you: I doubt that. I doubt that, if we become better church technocrats, then we'll be the church we were in 1972 (a high-water mark for both congregations I serve.)

I think our focus has to be on the "why" of it. Why do we do this? Why do we go to so great an effort to sustain ourselves as a people set apart in a way, to maintain an institution (albeit a light one), and (for a long time) to maintain a special building, these beautiful impossibles that dot the landscape in a way similar to trees, in that most people assume they'll always be there and never ask a thing of them.

In a way, they're not wrong.

The reign of God is as when someone scattered seeds and eventually what grew took over everything. The scandal: there's very little we need to *do* about it all. It's happening. Nothing is required of you, but it all might appeal to you, to participate in, to join up with.

Do you not perceive it?

There's this moment in the Old Testament reading we didn't read today.

Through Ordinary Time, we'll always have two Old Testament readings to choose from.

Ordinary Time is the longest season of the church year, the season following Pentecost, and whose Sundays count down in reference to Pentecost. This year we'll have 26 of those. This long season, it's when the church practices its discipline of patient faithfulness. We've had the highs of a half year of astonishing events—the birth of Christ, the epiphany of his mysterious purpose, the passion and death and resurrection and ascension. And now comes his ministry, the patient movement of this also urgent presence. Mark's understanding of Jesus, which is the gospel narrative we'll get most of this year, is an urgent presence, an immediate force. And yet even with this spin on the story, its unfolding takes time in our midst, and it is ordinary time.

Just go about your business.

But don't be surprised if everything gets upended, something urgent having arrived.

Just go about your business.

Throughout this, we'll have two choices for Old Testament readings in church. The other one for today, the one I didn't choose to have read, is from the book called 1st Samuel and it tells

of an event from about 900 years before Christ. It's all about when Samuel went looking for a new king for the people. He'd already anointed Saul to be their king, at the insistence of the people.

They wanted a king so they could be like other nations—and they didn't just want the Lord their God as their king. They wanted an earthly king, a man, just like every other nations' kings.

And it didn't matter Samuel's warnings about the ways of kings: they exploit, they take advantage, they enrich themselves at the people's expense, they secure themselves by sending the people to war.

Nonetheless, the people wanted a king. Though they could have made a go of living with the Lord as their king, and the law of peace and justice as their guide, it was all too hard, too mysterious and self-binding. No, the advantage of fitting in with the ways of the world outweighed the fact that the ways of the world aren't all that great.

They'd wanted an earthly king, which the prophet Samuel hesitated to grant them, but the Lord gave the go-ahead to do.

Samuel anointed Saul for the position.

But Saul proved unworthy of the position. He wasn't brutal enough in war. He hesitated at wiping whole peoples out—and that wasn't okay, which I'll admit makes me wonder whether such was the world before the dispensation of Jesus, that there really was only one reason to be chagrined when it came to brutality, and that was when you weren't brutal enough. Maybe Jesus changed that preference for brutality? Maybe the church changed that value system, that the meanest, toughest is the best?

Maybe.

So, Samuel was to find another, was to go to Bethlehem, to the house of Jesse, where one among his sons would prove worthy to be king.

Jesse brought out six of his sons.

Samuel moved down the line. Beginning with the eldest, he could sense though that none was the one.

At last, Jesse was to summon the youngest, who was out tending the sheep. Jesse hadn't even bothered to bring him along for consideration. David, the shepherd boy: when brought in, it was clear he was to be king.

But before he came, while Samuel was amidst the discerning, he said this interesting thing. Having concluded about each son, "The Lord has not chosen this one; neither has

the Lord chosen this one. The Lord has not chosen any of these,” Samuel said to Jesse, “Send for your youngest son and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.”

“We will not sit down until he comes here.” “We will not sit down until the deed is done.” See, sitting down is a sign of the work being complete. Sitting down is a sign of one’s work being done.

This, by the way, is the significance of Jesus imagined now seated at the right hand of the Father. His saving work is done. His creative work is complete. “It is finished,” he said from the cross according to the Gospel of John, this gospel which understands Jesus as the creative agent of God in the world, come to complete God’s yet incomplete creation. There was still something here to be worked on and worked out. There was still something of sin that bit around the edges and gnawed from the middle, and it needed to be worked out, like pocks of air in the clay of ceramics: to knead, to work, that what’s made will hold together even in the heat and fire of the kiln.

But then Jesus went on, to the cross, where “It is finished,” and was at last seated at the right hand of the Father—which so he’s imagined now, as seated beside the Father. As if his saving work is done, as if all that’s left is for it to take hold and have its mysterious, powerful effect.

And so, it does.

And so, it will, such that none can stop it. “I will accomplish it,” the Lord said through Ezekiel.

It will just take time, ordinary time.

Do you believe that? How hard do we have to push this mighty river?

Here’s a poem by Brigit Pegeen Kelly, written in 1985. It’s called “Doing Laundry on Sunday.”

So this is the Sabbath, the stillness
in the garden, magnolia
bells drying damp petticoats

over the porch rail, while bicycle
wheels thrum and the full-breasted tulips
open their pink blouses

for the hands that pressed them first
as bulbs into the earth.
Bread, too, cools on the sill,

and finches scatter bees
by the Shell Station where a boy
in blue denim watches oil

spread in phosphorescent scarves
over the cement. He dips
his brush into a bucket and begins

to scrub, making slow circles
and stopping to splash water on the children
who, hours before it opens,

juggle bean bags outside Gantsy's
Ice Cream Parlor,
while they wait for color to drench their tongues,

as I wait for water to bloom
behind me—white foam, as of magnolias,
as of green and yellow

birds bathing in leaves—wait,
as always, for the day, like bread, to rise
and, with movement

imperceptible, accomplish everything.

The scandal of the parable we remember Jesus this morning to have told so long ago is that it implies we're not much needed for the success of God's coming reign. "I will accomplish it," says the Lord through the prophet Ezekiel.

It was the time of exile. Living under Babylonian rule, the people couldn't take it, were having such a hard time just taking it. They would still revert to force. They would attempt to partner with neighboring Egypt against their conquerors, Babylon, a treacherous alliance they thought would turn back time, return them to the way things had been.

"Don't do it," was Ezekiel's unwelcome message. "Just let this be. Just trust that God can work even in Babylon for the sake of wellbeing, for the sake of justice and love." And it was the hardest thing to believe. It was the toughest thing to take—that their once mighty nation could be reduced to an annexed people amidst someone else's empire.

Losing status is just the worst thing, the hardest thing to cope with. People will fight hard against that.

So, what are we supposed to do, now? And why are we supposed to do it?

Why go to all this effort? Why go to any effort at all?

Here's why *I* do: because you have to clear a space for right perceiving. You have to prepare the ground. Those seeds will grow. The kingdom will come. The reign of God will be everlasting

and the all-in-all. Meanwhile, it's worth taking time, making place, for the perceiving of it, the conceiving of it.

When I was volunteering in the prison, I met a man who was waiting for release. One week, he said his good-byes to me. The next week, he was still there. "It's Pakistan," he said to me, a phrase he'd learned in the army.

"Pakistan?" I asked.

"Yeah, pack and stand," he explained. "They're always tell you to pack and stand." Get ready and then settle in. Be ready and chill out.

It's funny how I often I remember that.

Thanks be to God.