

**Grace Episcopal Church, Jefferson City**  
Fourth Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 6  
June 16, 2024

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

An unclean spirit was tormenting a man, so he went to Jesus and Jesus commanded the spirit to be quiet and to depart. And it did. Both! Jesus healed people—a leper, a paralyzed man, a man with a withered hand. And word was beginning to spread: something wonderful was happening. God’s Spirit was moving, and the movement seemed to be occurring around and *through* this man called Jesus.

Years later, when stories about Jesus were still circulating, a handful of people collected some of the stories and wrote them down. One of the collections had an introduction that goes like this: “Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God, saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent, and believe it.’” That’s a strong intro: “In and around Jesus, the kingdom of God came near.”

We call this collection *The Gospel according to Mark*, and for the next five months we’re going to study it. We’ll gather here on Sundays and listen together to the Jesus-stories collected in Mark. We’ll think about their implications, and we’ll stay open to the possibility that they might change our lives, for the better. We already started, two weeks ago, in Mark chapter 2. We’ll finish at the end of November, in Mark 13. That’s eleven chapters in five months—it ought to be enough time for the stories to make a difference.

So let’s get back to it. Today we heard another introduction, another summary statement: “With many parables [Jesus] spoke the word to those who were able to hear it. He spoke to them only in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.” Jesus proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God by telling stories, little dramas with characters and settings and plots and conflicts. He told stories to illustrate how God’s presence and activity is life-giving and division-resolving, how God’s presence and activity in our lives can cause us to flourish. It can pull us out of the deep and rushing water of our messed up lives. It can offer *eternal* life.

Jesus told his stories to encourage people to join in on the saving activity of God, to realign their lives with the goodness of the good news. He taught lessons with his parables, and he didn’t always spell out those lessons. Sometimes Jesus was content to not explain himself. I believe he thought that too much exposition, too many words could obscure a message, or dilute it, or derail the whole project. Jesus usually let his parables speak for themselves.

And what they said, and what they still say, for themselves, is this: God is busy establishing the kingdom. The parables we heard today are classic examples of that basic but profound lesson: “The kingdom of God is like a farmer who scattered seed, and then went away. The seeds did what seeds do: they sprouted and grew, all by themselves. The farmer had no idea how it happened, but when the plants matured and produced their fruit, the farmer went out into the field and brought in the harvest. End of discussion.” In certain places, under the right conditions, the earth produces plants. Farmers know a lot about those places and conditions, and they’ve learned how to help the earth produce plants. But here’s the thing: Farmers don’t completely understand the process, and they certainly don’t control it. They cooperate with it, and when they do that, flourishing happens.

Jesus announced that the kingdom of God is like that. It unfolds and spreads and brings flourishing on its own terms. God’s salvation comes in like a crop comes in. It’s like a field of grain,

alive and productive over the course of an entire growing season. It's arrival and growth is difficult to explain, and even difficult to see happening. Life according to God's project, God's way is happening, and it's happening at its own pace, according to its own rules and its own realities.

Or how about this one: "The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, one of the smallest seeds on earth. But once it is planted and takes root and begins to sprout, a tiny mustard seed grows up and becomes a great big shrub, and it puts forth branches that are large and strong enough that birds can come and make nests in them." The story and lesson of this parable are different. They're about farming, certainly, and they repeat the truth we don't completely understand or control growth. But there's another insight here, and it's that sometimes the growth surprises us. Big bushes sometimes grow from tiny seeds. The lesson here is that God's rule can also surprise us. The coming of God's life-giving way is often modest and unassuming. Sometimes it's weak or compromised, of even ineffective. But that's not really the case. God's saving, life-giving project often starts slowly, and in ways and places and people we don't expect. "But be assured," Jesus says, "It runs deep. It's doing its work! God's salvation is expanding and accomplishing it's mission, which is to nurture and encourage the growth of creation's spiritual life, like a big, strong branch does for a nest full of baby birds."

Throughout his ministry, Jesus demonstrated and taught that God's plan is accomplished according to obvious and reliable principles, even predictable principles. But God's plan is also accomplished in mysterious ways. It comes in largely on its own, like a crop growing in a field. God is at work, saving galaxies and worlds and nations and lives. And it's all happening on schedule, in God's own time and on God's own terms, though sometimes in ways and according to a logic that are not obvious or apparent. They can surprise us, manifesting where they're not expected and blooming to an extent that we cannot even imagine. God's modest and unassuming way can take the form of a single kind word, or a single small gift to somebody in need. It can appear as the youngest, puny son, the one who takes care of the sheep. Sometimes that one is actually God's choice to be king. Or the arrival of God's kingdom might look like God dying on a cross.

By the way, mentioning Jesse's son David reminds me of something, of how I thought about Bill Eldridge's sermon this past week. The Old Testament story we are following for the next several months is also about kings and kingdoms. And that's a good thing, for we don't have a lot of experience with or patience with monarchies. The Old Testament lessons over the next few months are going to be about the struggles of Israel's young kingdom, and the gospel lessons are going to be about Jesus's gift of the kingdom of God. Last week we heard monarchy is not God's first choice, but God does not prohibit it. This week we heard that God doesn't choose monarchs according to their obvious or assumed virtues. God looks at the heart. Polity doesn't matter to God; people do.

May God's Holy Spirit keep us mindful that His kingdom is not ours. May the Spirit help us let God rule, let His life grow and even surprise us. May we keep living like subjects of God's kingdom, keeping our eyes open to detect even the smallest manifestations of God's saving presence and activity in our lives. Amen.