

A SEEDY KINGDOM

Ezekiel 17:22-24; Psalm 78:1-4; Mark 4:30-34

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When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the
Jews, he
would go to a certain place in the forest

There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and God would send a
miracle of deliverance

Later, it fell to his disciple -- the celebrated Magid of Mezritch -- to intercede with
heaven

He went to the same place in the forest and prayed, "Master of the universe:

I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer"

--and again, disaster would be averted

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov would go into the forest and say, "I do not
know
how to light the fire; I do not know the prayer. But I know the place and
that will be enough"

Finally, it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune

Sitting in his armchair, head in his hands, he spoke with God:

"Holy One, I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer;

"I cannot even find the place in the forest.

"All I can do is to tell the story and that must be sufficient"

--And it was!

Jesus was another rabbi who knew the power of stories

Mark's Gospel says "Jesus did not speak to the crowds except in parables"

--Jesus didn't invent parables

But he was a master of the medium

As a preacher, I marvel at Jesus' power to draw stories and images from every
facet of life:

A woman kneading dough, a shepherd seeking a lost sheep, a thief in the
night

--I marvel that Jesus captured and kept all these stories without benefit of a
notebook or smart phone!

But somehow he never let a good story slip from his grasp

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus muses aloud, "With what can we compare the
kingdom of God?
What parable will we use for it?"

Then he recalls seeing a sprawling mustard bush on the edge of town

--"Well, it's like this," says Jesus. "The mustard seed is the tiniest of all
seeds.

And yet it grows into a bush brimming with wide, welcoming branches
where
all the birds of the air can build a nest"

Now Jesus uses the mustard seed in another, more famous story:

"If you had the faith of a mustard seed," he said, "you could say to that
mountain,

'Move from here to there' and it would obey you!"

--but in today's parable, the mustard seed symbolizes not faith, but the Word
of God

As Jesus says earlier in the chapter -- in the Parable of the Sower -- "The
sower sows *the Word!*"

As noted in today's Children's Time, this week our first-graders got their first
"Big Kid" Bible
from the Church

No, this year there was no marching to the front of the sanctuary where our
first graders
stood proudly before the congregation, clutching their Bibles, beaming

--but our ever imaginative Children's Ministry Associate, Chrissy Hardy,
found other fun,
engaging ways to get those Bibles into their hands

Now it falls to our first-graders' parents and grandparents, church family and
God- parents
to teach them the stories and truths of Scripture

For it is the Bible that forms us as we learn the ways of God thru the life and
witness of
Israel and supremely, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ

As Spurgeon said of John Bunyan -- his Baptist forebearer from two
centuries before --
"His blood is bibline! You prick him and he bleeds the word of God"

I want this church to raise children like that . . .

--for whom the stories and truths of the Bible are their native tongue!

Jesus says when the truth of God's Word and Kingdom gets in your blood,
gets in
your heart, gets in your soul, it changes you!

Like a tiny mustard seed, hidden in the ground, the power and potential of
that
Word slowly, mysteriously unfolds . . .

--until it grows into a love and welcome so big and bold and boisterous, only
Jesus could create it

Just like that Japanese Maple growing in front of our living room window
that our
trimmers are powerless to contain

Recently, an online neighborhood forum I'm a part of, erupted into a debate
about the
Black Lives Matter signs popping up in some yards

People on both sides of the argument said the usual, predictable things,
most
generating more heat than light

--but for me, the whole matter was put to rest by a woman who posted a pic
of
a hand-written note anonymously put in her mailbox

In this touching note, the writer identified herself as the mother of "two black
boys"

Then she shared how much her neighbor's Black Lives Matter sign meant
to her sons

--"Every time we walk or drive past it," the mother wrote, "my boys point
excitedly
and say, "Look mommy! We matter to them!"

Now I don't know whether the woman who put that sign in her yard is a
Christian,
though I suspect she is a person of faith

But I do know her broad, unconditional, mustard bush welcome put a smile
on the
face of God

And here's the best part: the Story of God drawing near in Jesus is not *just* a
story

No, the Word of God, the truth of God drawing near in Jesus is fleshed out
and
embodied in a breathlessly holy yet intimately human life

--you see, Jesus didn't just *tell* Parables

Jesus became the definitive parable of what God lavish, reckless love
looks like
and lives like

When C. S. Lewis began as a new university don at Oxford, he was a
convinced atheist

But in time, his friendship with a group of Christian writers known as the
Inklings
forced him to rethink his position

--Lewis found dismissing the Christian faith not quite so easy when it was
presented by such
formidable minds as J. R. R. Tolkien, Dorothy Sayers, and T. S. Eliot

One night, Lewis invited two members of the Inklings - Tolkien and Hugh Dyson
-- to dinner

The threesome talked for hours about the wonder of God's self-revealing in
Jesus Christ

--Lewis was moved by the discussion but confessed he could not
understand how
"the life and death of Someone . . . two thousand years ago could help
us here and now
-- except in so far as his example could help us"

Tolkien and Dyson invited Lewis to ponder the power of myth, one of his
literary interests

Myths are stories from long ago that still pack truth still today

--"Yes," Lewis conceded, "but myths are lies, even though lies breathed of
silver"

Lewis' friends then pressed their argument home

The Christian story was a "myth" in that life-changing truth was embedded
within it

--yet here was the critical distinction: the Christian story really *happened*

The story of God's undying love was etched in history by the life, death,
and
resurrection of Jesus Christ

Sometime in the wee hours of the morning, faith dawned for C. S. Lewis

The darkness of his disbelief was shattered by the searing light of God's
grace in Jesus Christ

--the next day he wrote a friend that he had "passed on from believing in
God to
to definitely believing in Christ"

He was now -- and with conviction -- a Christian

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14)

And that Word, that Truth, that Story yet holds within it the seeds of a
remarkable transformation

--namely, the people we become by following Jesus . . .

Those whose love and welcome are like a sprawling mustard bush of
unbounded grace,
where all sorts of hurting, needy folk find refuge and rest

"With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use
for it?"

It is like a conscientious home-owner who puts a sign in her yard that
changes the
lives of some little boys

--or the Kingdom is like a crusty university professor whose heart is broken
open by
the Good News of Jesus

Or maybe the Kingdom is found in somebody like you who is becoming in
Jesus'
company, someone you never knew you could be

*O holy Christ, draw us ever deeper into the welcoming embrace of your
grace*

*Then by the power of your word, unfolding within us, break open our
hearts and
throw open our arms to all who need you.*

In your holy, healing name we ask this, Amen.

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