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 Inkling 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 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.

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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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