

## “A Ride Like No Other”

*“It is the same with my word. I send it out, and it always produces fruit. It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it” (Isaiah 55:11).  
Mark 4:26-34 <sup>1</sup>*

Some of you may be familiar with Laird Hamilton. Laird is regarded by many as the world’s best surfer of gigantic waves, and *YouTube* is awash in videos of him riding unbelievable waves. It is he that you see riding the huge wave in the background of today’s *PowerPoint*.

Laird has invented and pioneered the use of a new kind of surfboard, known as a “foil board,” that puts the surfer above the surface of the water on a hydrofoil. For reasons not clear to me, the foil board allows the expert surfer to begin riding a wave before it becomes visible to the unpracticed eye, considerably extending the ride. For all practical purposes, when Laird rides the beginning of such a wave, he is carried along by powerful forces the rest of us cannot see.

Many of us have read Rick Warren’s excellent book, *What On Earth Am I Here For?*<sup>2</sup> And it continues to be a best-seller as millions of persons around the world seek help in finding God’s purposes in their lives. You may not know that Rick had a prior book that’s just as good, *The Purpose Driven Church*. Rick is a pastor in Southern California, where surfing is extremely popular, and he begins *The Purpose Driven Church* like this:

“If you take a class on surfing, you’ll be taught everything you need to know about surfing: how to choose the right equipment; how to use it properly; how to recognize a ‘surfable’ wave; how to catch a wave and ride it as long as possible; and, most important of all, how to get off a wave without wiping out. But you’ll never find a course that teaches ‘How to Build a Wave.’”<sup>3</sup>

Rick’s point is that it is God—not we humans—who builds waves in the ocean, and it is God—not we humans—who builds the reality we know as the Church, the Kingdom of God. There was nothing ambiguous in Jesus’ statement that “***I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it***” (Matthew 16:18).

At the same time, as we make our way through the Lenten Season in the Year of our Lord 2017, we may have some nagging doubts about all that. If we look at the world around us with all its hurts and hatred, scandal and suffering, the advance and the victory of the Kingdom of God can seem pretty remote. And that feeling of remoteness is not unique to us. Peter expressed similar frustration when he wrote that “*What happened to the promise that Jesus is coming again? From before the times of our ancestors, everything has remained the same since the world was first created*” (2 Peter 3:4).

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on March 12, 2017.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke. Digital Version.

<sup>2</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life: What On Earth Am I Here For?* (Zondervan, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Zondervan, 1995).

And it was in response to such questions as these that Jesus spoke these words: <sup>26</sup> *“This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. <sup>27</sup> Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. <sup>28</sup> All by itself [“automatically”] the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. <sup>29</sup> As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”*

<sup>30</sup> *Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? <sup>31</sup> It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. <sup>32</sup> Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade” (Mark 4:26-32).*<sup>4</sup> Let’s consider these two short parables for a little while, with Laird Hamilton’s enormous wave as a backdrop.

These are now the second and third parables about seeds and sowing that Mark has recorded in what we know as “the fourth chapter,” and the first of today’s parables—the one about the seed growing “secretly” or “automatically,” appears only in Mark.<sup>5</sup>

The mustard seed of which Jesus spoke was black mustard (*sinapis nigra*). Folks used the seeds to make sauces, and they made greens from the leaves . . . just as we do today. While the mustard seed may not be absolutely the smallest seed on earth, it is so tiny that it requires about 750 of them to weigh a gram, and 21,000 of them to weigh an ounce. Yet from this seed grows a mustard plant that becomes as much as 8-12 feet tall! The meaning of the parable lies in the contrast between the smallest seed and the greatest shrub, and in the fact that the shrub grows from the seed. We refer to the same idea when we speak of tiny acorns and giant oaks.

To tell the truth, Jesus’ own ministry was a lot like that mustard seed. He was born in a feed trough, and grew up in a very modest working-class home. After learning the trade of the carpenter, he eventually became a rabbi without credentials, leading a congregation without clout. Jesus was a person who was impressed by a cup of cold water, and who got excited over a widow’s tiny offering.

When Jesus left the carpenter’s shop for the last time as He followed His Father’s summons, few people probably even noticed, except perhaps the town gossips. Those folk may have already written Jesus, Joseph’s son, off as a strange fellow who would come to no good—leaving His widowed mother and younger brothers and sisters behind, of all things! He was a mustard seed “blowing in the wind.” They could not see that as Jesus, God’s Son, locked the door to His shop, all of human history pivoted on its hinges and the world itself changed its course.

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<sup>4</sup> Mark concludes this group of parables with a summary statement that indicates that he is selected illustrations of Jesus’ teaching from a much larger cycle of tradition: <sup>33</sup> *With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. <sup>34</sup> He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.* The motive for Jesus’ use of the parables is expressed in terms of his accommodation to that stage of preparation which was present in the crowd – he spoke the word “as they were able to hear it.”

This means that he adapted it to the level of understanding that he found in his listeners. Had Jesus spoken to the crowds and direct manner they would have been forced to make a decision immediately. That decision could’ve expressed only unbelief and rejection. Jesus adoption of the indirect address of the parable was accordingly an expression both of grace and of judgment. It was an expression of grace that allowed time for reflection on his appeal to penetrate beneath his words to the word.

<sup>5</sup> The only other occurrence of *αυτοματη* (“*automatē*”) in the New Testament is in Acts 12:10. It also occurs in the Septuagint in Leviticus 25:5, Joshua 6:5, 2 Kings 19:29, and Job 24:24.

As gripping as this image is, we really need to focus our gaze on what Jesus did after He left the shop. Knowing that His time was short, and faced with the awful enormity of human need, Jesus could have ministered madly to our suffering and sinning in a nervous, headlong fashion. Had He been as we are, he would have. But He wasn't, and He didn't.

Rather than embarking on thirty-six months of door-to-door and mass evangelism, Jesus made strategic spiritual retreats with a handful of disciples whom He taught to see the unseen, to hear the whispers of the Spirit, to fear nothing but God, and to be in the world in a very different way. Jesus invested Himself in twelve men because He knew the incredible power that is released through the planting of seed.

What would you do if your Mission Impossible was to change the course of human history in thirty-six months? If I were given such a mission, and if I weren't completely immobilized by the assignment, I would probably launch into a huge media campaign, American style. Maybe I would do a "Think God" blitz like the girl did in one of the "Oh, God!" movies. I doubt that it would be six months before I ended up in the hospital.

But Jesus? Instead of developing ulcers and hypertension, Jesus was *The Man with the Quiet Center*. Do you remember what Jesus was criticized for most often? The religious crowd thought Jesus wasn't really very religious at all. He had strange ideas, but worse than that, he spent far too much time going to parties and weddings. He associated with the wrong sorts of people. He went on too many hikes and camping trips, and he spent entirely too much time *fishing!* More than this, and even with the mission of changing the course of human history in only thirty-six months, you'd be hard pressed to find any account in the gospel records that Jesus was ever even in a hurry.

How did this happen? Jesus spoke with exceptional power because He spent unhurried time with His Heavenly Father. Jesus could give the best hours of the day to prayer, because He knew that as He rested in the Eternal, God was working, and the seed was growing.

Every farmer knows that if the harvest is to come, it's essential to cultivate the ground, plant the seed, tend and irrigate the fields, and gather the crop. But farmers also know that they themselves have no power to make the seeds grow. Jesus told us that physical seed and spiritual seed both grow "automatically" (*αὐτομάτη*), "without the farmer's help."

The development from seed to harvest is God's deed; it is God's wonder. So, too, the Kingdom of Heaven comes miraculously, by a wonder-deed of God. It's really only by the quiet working of God's Spirit—sometimes over a period of months, often over a period of years—that you and I finally confront our brokenness and our emptiness. It's only by the patient, persistent beckoning of God's Spirit that we finally decide to trust ourselves to the One who really, really loves us. And it is mostly in this way that the Kingdom comes.

Jesus' life, His ministry, and these two parables in particular, teach us the lesson of patient waiting. Little by little, we learn to wait in increasing confidence that what has been sown will be reaped; that what God has begun, God will bring to magnificent and irresistible conclusion.

Though the miracles Jesus did while He was among us are breathtaking indeed, the miracle of the Church Jesus planted is probably a miracle more striking than any other. Usually we find ourselves thinking of the billions of persons who have never heard the Good News of Jesus. We think of the "*fields white unto harvest*," as well we should. But we also need to remember that as we sit here this morning, about one person in four in our world claims to follow Jesus in one form or another.

Sure, many of those believers desperately need to deepen and to grow in their following of the Way of Jesus. That's certainly true for me, and it might be true for you. But with me or without me, the growth of God's Kingdom is constantly taking place. There is nothing spasmodic about God. God's work goes quietly on as the Plan of the Ages unfolds.

As we make our way toward Holy Week once again, Jesus brings the Good News that you and I don't have to try to force the Kingdom to come. In fact, Jesus warns us not to try that. Over the centuries, persons have tried to force the coming of the Kingdom by sparking revolutions of one sort or another, and that's really what Judas was trying to do when he betrayed Jesus.

There have been persons who thought they could interpret what they took to be hidden meanings in Scripture so as to know exactly what God was going to do, and when. These folk have drawn charts, worn white robes, made predictions, and climbed mountains to watch cataclysm come, but their predictions have been worse than bad weather forecasting. There have been former and latter-day Pharisees who thought they could force the Kingdom's coming through attempts at legalistic perfectionism, completely missing the point that when Jesus said to "be perfect," He was talking about love (Matthew 5:48).

In these two short parables about seeds, Jesus spoke forcefully against such hustle and chutzpah. At the same time, it's important to remember that Jesus was not saying that we can ignore the requirements of cultivating, planting, irrigating, or weeding the crop. The whole point of the Great Commission is that we are to do precisely that.

Jesus was not saying that we shouldn't work, shouldn't preach, shouldn't evangelize. He was saying that we should work, preach, and evangelize strategically, trustingly, and confidently. Following Jesus cannot be done by gritting your teeth and trying hard. Following Jesus means letting go . . . and letting God work through us.

We busy Christians frequently try too hard, and we trust too little.<sup>6</sup> The picture Jesus gives us is of a farmer who plants the crops, milks the cows, mends the fences . . . *and sleeps deeply*. The farmer's part in the crop is planting, cultivating, and harvesting. The growing comes as a gift.

These two parables offer a helpful word to those of us who feel driven or pushed by impossible expectations. When you're faced with a day of heavy demands, remember that it's not how much you accomplish in a day that counts, but how much you do of what God intends for you to do. And such an attitude soon causes us to wonder *what it is that God is doing*.

"Here's the Deal about the Kingdom of God," Jesus says to us. "The Kingdom of God is like a tiny mustard seed. It's like yeast that works imperceptibly in the dough. It's like the development of one perfect pearl. It's like finding just one lost sheep, or just one lost coin, or just one lost son. It belongs to little children and others who may seem 'small' in your eyes."

If we look at the evidence, I think we have to conclude that God likes small beginnings. God likes to work in hidden ways that are easily overlooked. God loves each and every lost individual, even when 99 percent may be safely under His care. God passionately cares for the socially unimportant whom others trample as they rush toward worldly prominence. As Arthur Aigner wrote in 1894,

God is working his purpose out, as year succeeds to year:

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<sup>6</sup> I learned this phrase from Watchman Nee.

God is working his purpose out, and the time is drawing near—  
 Nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be,  
 When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God  
 As the waters cover the sea.

And that brings us back to Laird Hamilton and those ginormous waves. Laird's foil board allows him to ride waves that most people can't see and don't even recognize as waves; and for most of human history, that's what it has been like and will be like to serve the Kingdom of God.

Think of it this way. If we were on a ship crossing the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans, we would spend many days at sea when it looked like nothing was happening at all. All we would see, day after day, in any direction we looked, would be "water, water, everywhere, and not a drop to drink." But for those with eyes to see, the silent movement of the heavens, perceptible when the sky was clear, would reveal that progress was being made toward the goal.

And all along the way, the tides would be moving unseen beneath us, beginning ever so slightly to build a wave that would, in time, break upon a distant shore. Those of us in this room have seen the irresistible force of great tsunamis that have struck Indonesia and Japan in the not-so-distant past. We can imagine the unstoppable force of the waves we see Laird riding. And in the case of the Kingdom of God, when the Tsunami that is the Kingdom breaks upon the farther shore, nothing in all the universe will be able to stop its arrival.

Like Laird's waves, God's Kingdom is on the move. It is enormous beyond our comprehension, and it's there whether or not we perceive it and whether or not we're prepared to ride it. And should we wish to ride this wave, we will soon learn that it travels so fast that our own paddling simply won't do. We need the Holy Spirit to tow us along to get up to speed. And even when we catch this Wave, we still don't do the bulk of the work. We simply choose to ride the Wave that God is building, exhilarated by this Ride that is like no other.

Even as was true when Jesus first spoke these parables, God's Kingdom continues to advance at this very moment, and God's Spirit is moving toward a harvest both in our time and beyond history. As Peter went on to answer the question about God's apparent tardiness, "*The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise to return, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to perish, so he is giving more time for everyone to repent*" (2 Peter 3:9-10). And Paul added, "*So don't get tired of doing what is good. Don't get discouraged and give up, for we will reap a harvest of blessing at the appropriate time*" (Galatians 6:9).

My friends, the blade from the seed even now is visible, in this community of faith, and in the world beyond our doors. A New World is being born for those with eyes to see. The Season of Lent reminds us that as our Lord came of old, so He will come again . . . only the next time, every eye will see Him and every knee will bow to Him (Philippians 2:10-11; Revelation 1:7).

Even in 2017, the Kingdom's coming is sure. And because it is, let me close with the very last words in the Bible:

*"He who is the faithful witness to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming soon!'  
 Amen! Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all"  
 (Revelation 22:20-21).*