

“The Kingdom’s Coming is Sure”

Mark 4:26-32 ¹

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of the Christian Year and the first sacred prelude to CHRISTmas Day. Last Friday was the official beginning of the Christmas shopping season, and the first secular prelude to January credit card bills. Taken together, these two events mean that the CHRISTmas season has officially begun, and begun in earnest.

Advent is a wonderful time of anticipation and celebration. Bright lights and cheerful spirits are the order of the day, and pageants and parties are generously sprinkled across the calendar. December is uniquely the Month of Music all across our land.

Even so, celebrating Christmas is no snap. For many people, Advent is the most harried, expensive and exhausting four weeks of the year. We want Advent to be a holy time, but we’re frustrated to find that it’s the arrival of Santa Claus, much more than the coming of Jesus, that claims most of our time and energy.

We want to celebrate God’s great Gift by giving to others, but we’re frustrated to find ourselves pressured into buying things for family and friends who have little need of them, while giving little attention to those whose needs are great. We want Advent to be a time of remembering a heavenly visitation, but we sometimes find ourselves so hurried and harried that we just wish for it all to be over soon.

And amid all the hoopla of The Season, perhaps we have some nagging doubts. What’s it all about, anyway? If we look at the world around us with all its hurts, hatred, and fears, the Kingdom of God and the arrival of a Savior seem very remote. Did God’s Messiah really come? And if He did, did His coming really *make any difference*? Peter quoted such skeptics in his second letter: “So Jesus promised to come back did He? Then where is He? Why, as far back as anyone can remember, everything has remained exactly the same since the world was first created” (2 Peter 3:4).

And so, in this, our Advent Situation, we turn to the Christ Child, now become a man, as He speaks to us in the verses we’ve read from Mark 4. You may wish to turn back to that passage to focus on this welcome message Jesus brings as we approach CHRISTmas once again.

In this text, Jesus was explaining the nature of the Kingdom of God to His new disciples, and He was using illustrations that would make sense to men from small farming villages and fishing towns. These particular parables have to do with seeds.

The last two verses of today’s text² remind us that Jesus frequently taught the crowds in parables, explaining His fuller meaning to the disciples later, since they often missed the point. In both His public and His private teaching, Jesus announced that “The Kingdom of God is here, but it’s not like you thought it would be.” And to the amazement and wonder of those who understood Him, Jesus was saying that God was, at that very moment, and before their very eyes, beginning to fulfill the ancient promises concerning the Messiah!

The mustard seed of which Jesus spoke in verses 30-32 was black mustard. While this seed was proverbial for its smallness, it is not in fact the smallest known seed.³ Jesus was not giving a lesson in botany. He was illustrating a point using the smallest seed with which His audience was familiar.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on December 1, 2019.

² Mark 4:33-34

³ For example, the seed of the black orchid is smaller, and there are probably others.

Folks used these seeds to make sauces, and they made greens from the leaves . . . just as we still do. 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 tiny seed grows a plant that can become as much as 8-10 feet tall!

As I'm sure you know, 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 giant oaks from tiny acorns.⁴

To tell the truth, Jesus' own ministry was a lot like that mustard seed. He was born in a cattle 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 were not able to see that as Jesus, God's Son, locked the door to His shop, all of human history pivoted on its hinges and the world changed its course.

As gripping as this image is, we need to concentrate our attention 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 serve God in the world in a very different way than had ever been seen before. Jesus invested Himself in just twelve men and a few women because **He knew the incredible power that is released through the planting of seed.**

One of the things this parable about mustard seed suggests is that the Kingdom of God may continue to appear to be a failure, even in our own time. The tiniest of seeds may become the greatest of all shrubs, but a shrub is still a shrub. Mustard is not Sequoia.

This parable challenges our tendency to conclude that “bigger is better.” The truth of the matter is that we much prefer “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” to mustard seeds. We like bling and noise and chutzpah. And while we're distracted by such “fake news,” God's Kingdom continues to grow, hidden in plain sight.

This morning's first parable, about the growing seed (vv. 26-29), is only recorded in Mark, and it's the only parable unique to Mark. To note the end from the beginning, verse 29 refers to Joel 3:13, where the “harvest” has to do with God's judgment. Perhaps you've seen movies where the very last moments of the film give information that puts everything that has happened in a completely different frame. That's part of what Jesus was saying about what is going to happen in God's Future. Let's see how He moved toward this conclusion.

Jesus used an agricultural example that we can understand even if we're not cultivators of the soil. Jesus began by pointing out that once a farmer sows seed, what happens after that is

⁴ Cp. Matthew 13:32; Luke 13:19

hidden, imperceptible, constant, and “automatic.” That’s actually the word Jesus used. The word being translated “all by itself” is the word *αυτοματη*, from which we obviously get “automatic.”

(As an aside, this is the verse from which Natural Church Development, which we’re using for our strategic planning, gets the idea of “all by itself” growth. You’ll be hearing a lot more about that.)

Jesus pointed out that the farmer doesn’t know how the seed grows, and we still don’t really understand that process, even now. Comparing the growth of God’s Kingdom to the growth of the seed, Jesus pointed out that this growth can’t be forced. Yet growth is still happening, even though it looks like nothing is happening at all.

Jesus tells us to trust that God is at work and will bring the harvest, even though the world is still in a hot mess. And we do well to remember this parable whenever we begin to take ourselves and our efforts too seriously, as though God were dependent on our plans and programs in order to establish the Kingdom. Patience is essential.⁵

What do you think you would do if God gave you the task of changing the entire 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 criticized for going on too many hikes and camping trips and fishing trips! 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, and He associated with the wrong sorts of people.

You and I seem to always be in a hurry, especially during Advent. People in line at a stoplight wait only a nanosecond before honking at the person in the lead. Kids ask, “Why does a microwave take *so long?*” *Amazon* is increasing the speed of delivery so much that pretty soon they’ll deliver things before we even know we want them.

In stark contrast to all our hustle and bustle, and even with the assignment of changing the course of human history in thirty-six months, you’d be hard pressed to find any account in the gospel records that Jesus was ever even in a hurry.

So how was Jesus so chill? Here’s what I think: Jesus stayed calm and acted and spoke with exceptional power because He spent a lot of 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 in order to have a harvest, it’s essential to cultivate the ground, plant the seed, tend and irrigate the fields, and finally, to gather the crop. But farmers also know that **they themselves have no power to make the seeds grow**. Jesus reminds us that physical seed and spiritual seed both grow *αυτοματη*—“automatically,” without our help.

The development from seed to harvest out in the fields 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

⁵ See also James 5:7-8

patient, persistent beckoning of God's Spirit that I finally decide to trust myself to the One who really, really loves me. 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 live with increasing confidence that what has been sown will be reaped; that what God has begun, God will bring to its intended and glorious conclusion.

Though the miracles Jesus did while He was among us are breathtaking indeed, the miracle of the Church Jesus planted may be a miracle more striking than any other. When we think about our world, we usually think about 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 quietly goes on as the Plan of the Ages unfolds. And the wonderful thing about it all is that you and I get to help with the harvest . . . if we will!

My friends, as we begin December and Advent, Jesus offers the Good News that we don't have to try to *make* the Kingdom come. In fact, Jesus warns us not to try to force God's timing. Over the centuries, many persons have tried to force the coming of the Kingdom by sparking revolutions of one sort or another. That's really what Judas was trying to do when he betrayed Jesus.

Across the years, 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 being perfect in love.

In these two short parables about seeds, Jesus wasn't 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 wasn't 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 can't be done by gritting your teeth and trying hard. Following Jesus means doing what we can . . . and letting God's Spirit work.

The Chinese Christian Watchman Nee often said that we try too hard, and we trust too little. 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.

So, as we struggle through the CHRISTmas rush, may God protect us from frenzied "Christmasing." A new world is being born for those with eyes to see. The season of Advent 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. As there was a First Advent, so there will be a

Second. Even in 2019, and even in 2020, the Kingdom's coming is Sure.

As Arthur Aigner wrote in 1894,

God is working his purpose out, as year succeeds to year:
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.⁶

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1). Amen, and Amen.

⁶ https://hymnary.org/text/god_is_working_his_purpose_out