

Birds in the Bush
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Scriptures:

²⁶He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."
³⁰He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."
³³With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples. (Mark 4:26-34, NRSV)

Introduction:

Farmer Joe decided his injuries from the accident were serious enough to sue the trucking company responsible. In court, the trucking company's high-powered lawyer was questioning farmer Joe. "Didn't you say at the scene of the accident, 'I'm fine?'" questioned the lawyer.

Farmer Joe responded, "Well I'll tell you what happened. I had just loaded my favorite mule Bessie into the..."

"I didn't ask for any details," the lawyer interrupted, "just answer the question. Did you not say at the scene of the accident, 'I'm fine!'" Farmer Joe said, "Well I had just got Bessie into the trailer and I was driving down the road..."

The lawyer exasperated, interrupted again and said, "Judge, I am trying to establish the fact that at the scene of the accident, this man told the highway patrolman on the scene that he was just fine. Now several weeks after the accident he is trying to sue my client. I believe he is a fraud. Please tell him to simply answer the question."

By this time the judge was fairly interested in Farmer Joe's answer and annoyed with the lawyer, so he said to the lawyer, "I'd like to hear what he has to say about his favorite mule Bessie."

Joe thanked the judge and proceeded, "Well as I was saying, I had just loaded Bessie, my favorite mule, into the trailer and was driving her down the highway when this huge semi-truck and trailer ran the stop sign and smacked my truck right in the side. I was thrown into one ditch and Bessie was thrown into the other. I was hurting real bad and didn't want to move. However, I could hear ole Bessie moaning and groaning. I knew she was in terrible shape.

Shortly after the accident a highway patrolman came on the scene. He could hear Bessie moaning and groaning so he went over to her. After he looked at her he took out his gun and shot her. Then the patrolman came across the road with his gun in his hand and looked at me. He said, "Sorry, but your mule was in such bad shape I had to put her down. How are you doing?"

All this to say, there is a back story to Jesus' agricultural parables this morning.

Sermon:

The author of Mark, I think, was living in a Jewish community in Rome shortly after the Jewish Rebellion at about the time General Titus, son of the Emperor Vespasian, entered Rome amid all the pomp and accolades of his victory over the Jews. The author had either heard of or has seen the victory parades displaying items looted from the Jerusalem Temple along with various tableaux set up along the victory-parade route that displayed Jewish rebel leaders, representing their captured cities, dressed as they were at the time of their surrenders. These leaders would eventually have a rope put around their necks and dragged to Mamertine Prison to be strangled to death.¹

As religiously tolerant and cosmopolitan as Rome was, this was probably not the best time to be a Jew or a Jewish Jesus-believer. So, our author writes his gospel to his fellow believers in Rome, portraying Jesus as the misunderstood Jewish Messiah, man of peace. In Mark, Jesus and message were not really understood by his disciples, the religious leaders, or acknowledged as part of the zealot movement by the two zealots or brigands crucified alongside him. So, obviously, he could not have been a militant, messianic figure. Jesus, in Mark, is only recognized as the Holy One of God by the demons, and a lone Roman soldier at the foot of the cross called him a son of a god because in his mind, only a man who was imbued with god-like strength and presence could have endured those agonizing hours on the cross without crying out.

The heart of Jesus' message in the Synoptic Gospels is the nearness and coming fullness of the Kingdom or rule and reign of God on earth. It is his disciples', the people's, and the leadership's misunderstanding of the nature of the kingdom of God, the Messiah, and citizenship in the kingdom that put Jesus at odds with them. Parenthetically, let me just mention that the idea of the or a Kingdom of God coming on earth and all that it meant was unique to the ancient Jews.

Jesus' audiences may have held differing ideas about the coming kingdom and who was in and who was out, but they would have understood what Jesus was talking about in general. Sort of like us talking about the American Way of Life knowing it means different things to different people at different times. Jesus' message about the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven, a euphemism for the Kingdom of God, and people's expectations of a coming warrior-priest-messiah, with all its religious-political overtones, would eventually get Jesus charged with sedition and crucified.

When we hear the word kingdom, we think of a king sitting on a throne ruling the affairs of his subjects in some given realm or country. If you will remember in the Hebrew Scriptures, when the Israelites were still a loose federation of tribes, they demanded that the prophet-judge Samuel anoint them a king, so they could be like other nations. By having a centralized government to protect them from enemies and administer the affairs of the people, it freed the tribes from having to keep a ready-response posture in support of their allies as well as for their own security and safety.

The prophet-judge Samuel warned the people about the abuses of kings, but the people still wanted a king. Saul was Israel's first king and he didn't work out well, nor did most of Israel's kings for that matter. Israel definitely had a love-hate relationship with its kings. Even the idealized Davidic kingship took a lot of spin over an extended period to make it acceptable. However, this did not stop the people from longing for an ideal king, one who would be rooted in

¹ Roth, Cecil. "Simon bar Giora, Ancient Jewish Hero: A Historical Reinterpretation." Commentary Magazine, Jan. 1, 1960.

God, just, and not tyrannical in his use of power. Yet, kings in conjunction with temple priests, both of which represented the gods, ordered the ancient world.

Jumping ahead, the idea of the kingdom of God came to be understood as an extension of God's promises to bless Abraham's descendants and all nations through his descendants. However, many of the Israelite sages and later the rabbis understood that the kingdom of God was already present to a significant degree in Torah, the Law, but only where it was acknowledged in people's lives. The Kingdom awaited its fullness, as we read in Psalms 96, when the Lord as true King will judge all nations with equity and establish God's divine rule upon all peoples.

Thus, the kingdom of God, as Jesus understood it in Mark's Gospel, was going to be an earthly kingdom, wherein God would rule through a king of Davidic descent, and this king would mete out justice and bring peace and prosperity to a restored Israel.

As much as Jesus understood the kingdom as being present in those who live by the spirit and intent of the Law, he also understood that the kingdom had come a little nearer as seen in corruption and national disaster of his time and in his call to respond to that corruption. Those who would be included in the kingdom and given places of honor would be devout Jews, who worshiped God in truth and spirit, regardless of their social status, and who loved their fellow Jews or neighbors as they loved themselves. The rest of the world's nations would be blessed by their association, support, and loyalty to God's people; that is, those who bless or honor the descendants of Abraham. (Gen. 12:3) The prophets of Isaiah, however, will expand the covenant blessing to include all Jews and non-Jews, who acknowledge and embrace God's will and ways. (Isaiah 14:1; Isaiah 66:21)

In summary, the kingdom of God when it inevitably comes ... ³² [the] day or hour [of which] no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone," will see all earthly rulers bow in homage to God's king, God's kingdom, and its people. Some believed that all those kingdoms, rulers, and people, who lived contrary to God's will and ways or were avowed enemies of Israel, would be wiped off the earth. Therefore, when we pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," we need to understand that we are in effect asking God to bring about a major political displacement of the world's governments, including ours, and their leaderships.

With the delay of Jesus' return to set up God's kingdom on earth, along with the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., which many Jews would have understood to be the end of their world, Jewish followers of Jesus began to downplay all the political dimensions and expectations of an earthly kingdom. Thus, Jesus' followers over time began to emphasize the interior, spiritual dimensions of the Kingdom of God and that of "the world to come."

As Christianity evolved and eventually broke with Judaism, belief and baptism into Jesus the Christ, prayer in the manner of Jesus, and what we would call the ethical and spiritual imitations of Jesus along with observing the Lord's Supper became the means of joining God's kingdom, now synonymous with Christ's coming reign on earth.

Now, to our text. Our first parable this morning focuses on Ole "Someone" [We all know Ole Someone.]. Ole Someone scattered seeds on the ground later to be plowed under. Ole Someone then goes about his daily life until one day, voilà, the seeds sprout and begin to grow.

The mystery of the seed's growth lies well beyond Ole Someone's understanding; however, when the grain ripens, Ole Someone goes out with his sickle and harvests the grain. We may go on to speculate that Ole Someone will turn the grain into a meal or flour for food. The point being that regardless of the mystery of growth, Ole Someone doesn't need to understand it to reap its benefits.

Jesus in another attempt to give people an idea about the Kingdom of God says it is like a mustard seed, one of the smaller seeds that will eventually become a bush large enough and strong enough for small birds to build their nest in its branches. What Jesus' audience would have

known, that Mark's audience and we may not know, is that comparing the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed was like comparing the kingdom of God to an annoying weed. Mustard had some medicinal uses and was a seasoning for food, but by-in-large it was a weed that could take over a field in no time at all. A little mustard was okay, but a lot was too much, and one certainly didn't plant a whole field of it - dumb, it grew abundantly in the wild. Jesus' mustard-bush metaphor may indicate that his understanding of the coming kingdom of God would be like an unwanted nuisance weed to some folks, but a divine crop to others. A divine crop that was growing and eventually would take over the lives and land of God's people. Anyway, this parable would have upset people's thinking about the kingdom and made them rethink it and its ways.

These seed parables in Mark tell us that the coming fullness of the kingdom of God will be the results of the mysterious and wondrous work of God, and does not require controversial, in-your-face militant evangelism or religious warriors. So, Jesus-believers in Rome, living amid suspicion, resentment, and fear, share the Good News quietly as you wait God's final actions.

In summary, for Jesus, the Kingdom of God is coming on earth - that's certain. There is much evidence that he anticipated it in his lifetime. The Apostle Paul expected it in his lifetime. The author of Matthew expected it after a brief time for the church to evangelize. Luke expected it to come in a later future in his world. The author of the Gospel of John indicated the Kingdom is here, now, in the life and spirit of the believer, growing incrementally into its fullness on earth one person at a time. However, as we see in Chapter 13 in Mark's Gospel, Jesus-believers, you need to stay faithful and helpful to your brothers and sisters in Christ because the kingdom's coming is just around the corner - who knows, maybe next week.

I hope in my brief overview of the Kingdom of God we can see that it is a concept far more complicated than just having a positive after life. It is about an expected regional event, centered in the holy lands of ancient Israel that under the auspices of the Holy Spirit will have global implications. We may debate the Kingdom's coming, how it will arrive, and what are its signs just as people did in ancient times. People may debate who will be its citizens, but the author of the Book of Daniel and Jesus indicated that no matter what, it is coming; this is not open for debate. The gospel writers saw it reaching new dimensions not only in Jesus' message, but in his death, and resurrection.

Standing here these many centuries later, as a non-Jewish, Jesus-believer, I am thoroughly convinced that God's coming kingdom as it has evolved and often been distorted under the influences of human culture, we can find the understanding of a time when the ways and will of God will rule the hearts and minds of people and concomitantly the affairs of human governments. In the meantime, the Kingdom of God that is here now as Jesus taught must give a sheltering, protective, and spiritual nesting place for people to live and wait until the fullness of God's time and what God has in store for this world.

As followers of Jesus, let us give witness as citizens to God's kingdom by living in the ways of Jesus the Christ. Let us welcome into our little corners of the kingdom all those that seek peace, justice, and good will among all. Let us receive with respect and love all those who receive the Gospel and commit themselves to its ways of kingdom citizenship, even though some of them by our reckoning may be birds of a different feather.

The nests in God's mustard field are growing, much to the annoyance of the Ruler and rulers of this world. Also, as birds living in God's mustard bushes, we need to be careful not to foul our nests with unnecessary religious requirements that exclude others from the kingdom that is here, now, because like Ole Someone, we don't always understand the mysterious and wondrous work of God.

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