

Yr. B, Proper 6
June 13, 2021
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1337 Words

Lessons: Ezekiel 17:22-24
Psalm 92:1-4, 11-14
2nd Corinthians 5:6-10, 11-17
Mark 4:26-34

Make no mistake, the timeless symbol for strength, stability, and grandeur in Holy Scripture is the noble cedar tree of Lebanon. “Thus says the LORD GOD, ‘I, myself, will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar...and plant it on a high and lofty mountain (in) Israel.’”

I read somewhere that the cedars of Lebanon are mentioned seventy times in the bible. The Holy Temple in Jerusalem, the home of God on earth, was built and decorated by King Solomon with giant cedars from Lebanon—upwards of 300 feet tall. They had to be floated down the Mediterranean Coast and carried uphill to Jerusalem.

The Palm tree, mentioned in our psalm, is the biblical symbol for victory—just think of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday with fronds scattered all over the streets.

And, of course, the olive branch is the biblical symbol for peace—think of Noah, languishing in the ark and looking for any promising sign that he could stop quarantining with all those stinky animals. Yet, best of all is the Cedar of Lebanon, the indisputable symbol for strength, stability and grandeur.

And so, when the Son of God was searching for the perfect metaphor to describe the Kingdom of God, he quite naturally compared it to...a mustard bush? C’mon, let’s be serious! Jesus says the mustard bush is the greatest of all shrubs, but—at the end of the day—it’s still *just a shrub*.

We want Jesus to tell us about a Kingdom as strong and sturdy as a forest, filled with those 300-foot cedars. We want Jesus to tell us of a Kingdom as victorious as a million palm branches scattered across cobblestones for a grand parade. We’ll even settle for Jesus telling us about God’s Kingdom, surrounded with a latticework of olive branches, woven together in peace.

I’m sorry. All you’re going to get from Jesus in these parables is the tiniest seed you can imagine, and then...a bush. It’s big enough for a couple of shaded bird nests, but not much else.

Fr. Thomas Keating, a Cistercian Monk who founded the Centering Prayer movement, helped me discover the irony of Jesus’ metaphor of the mustard seed in his book of *Meditations on the Parables of Jesus*. Fr. Keating died a few years ago, but I was fortunate to hear him speak when I was a student in seminary.

I think we are all inclined—like the prophet, Elijah—to expect God to show up in the earthquake, the strong wind, and in the fire. Fr. Keating expected God to be revealed—as God *was revealed* to Elijah—in the stillness of silence.

I’ve seen a lot of people raise their eyebrows, quizzically wondering about God’s nearness, when lightning strikes close by; but I have never seen anyone make that facial expression like that in a muddy garden with nothing flashy to see or thunderous to hear which might help us think of God’s nearness. St. Paul was right. “We must look not (only) at what *can be seen*, but (also) at what cannot be seen...we (must) walk by faith, not just by sight.”

And so says Jesus, “The Kingdom of God is (just like) someone scattering seed on the ground, and then just sleeping night after night, and rising up day after day, while those invisible, silent seeds just sprout and grow—*like a miracle*. He does not know how.

Jesus' parable reminds me how my daughter, Finley, used to express her bafflement at surprises when she was young. Some mysterious thing would surprise her, and I would ask, "How did *that happen?*"

Finley would just look up at me with a big wonder-filled smile, shrug her little shoulders, and say, "I no not know!" I believe she just might have named the Good News in today's Gospel lesson.

You see, the poor people of Galilee were sick and tired of the victorious Romans parading the mighty power of their giant Kingdom all around. Jesus' followers probably worried that the powerful Roman occupation of Palestine was perhaps in some way a punishment from God. To which Jesus seems to say, "(Don't worry) the Kingdom *of God* is like a seed so small you can hardly even see it. Just plant those seeds and trust God to do the rest! Watch as the tender mercies of God bloom and grow all around you."

How does that happen? I no not know.

Listen, the broken-hearted people of Judea probably wondered if their ongoing humiliation under the thumb of the arrogant, wealthy class was somehow a punishment from God. After all, the political and religious leaders held most of the nation's wealth. To which Jesus seems to say, "(Don't worry,) plant whatever seeds you do have, and trust God to do the rest! Just watch as the abundant love of God blooms and grows all around you."

How does it happen? I no not know.

Maybe the good news of today's Gospel lesson is just as timely for us to hear...because it is so easy to notice all the terrible forces and powers we cannot control, and wonder if in some way they represent a punishment from God. It's tempting, after all, to imagine God's wrath delivered through earthquakes, winds, and fires...or through illnesses, deaths, and other griefs we cannot fix. Jesus has some wisdom for us today: "Stop looking for God's wrath, and start planting your seeds. Believe a little in what you *cannot see*...walk by faith, not just by sight."

You know, we still live in an unjust society where billionaires are legally able to get away with paying \$0 in federal income taxes. With respect to the inequitable distribution of wealth, it is like ancient Judea. So, it can be tempting at times, to think in terms of scarcity, even though our lives are not scarce at all—not by global standards or national standards or Greenville standards. Jesus has some wisdom for us today: "Stop worrying about the seeds you *don't have*; and start planting the seeds you *do have*. Believe a little in what you *cannot see*...walk by faith, not just by sight."

I get it. Like you, I want God's Kingdom to be big and bold, something I can look up to. Like you, I want God's Kingdom to seem sturdy and strong, something I can lean upon. We want God's Kingdom to be as big and strong, as noble and as grand, as the Cedars of Lebanon. That's not how it is, according to Jesus—and I guess he should know. No. It's like seeds, scattered all around which sprout and grow like a miracle.

The other thing I learned from Fr. Keating's book about Jesus' parables is that the mustard bush is a species that spreads like wildfire! It sounds like my healthy artichoke plant back there in our parish garden. It sounds like the tomato vines back there during July, reaching out everywhere and fruitful beyond belief!

The mustard bush might be *just a shrub*, but it's on the move—it's always spreading! That is what happens when *you* plant seeds of grace. That is what happens when *you* plant seeds of mercy. That is what happens when we, the Church, plant seeds of faith...and hope...and love.

So, stop worrying about the cedar tree you *don't have*, and start doing something with the seeds you *do have*! Maybe you could scatter some of those seeds this week for the glory of God. Maybe you could plant a seed for

someone else. It is not that hard. It is not even complicated. It just requires believing a little in what we cannot see. It requires walking by faith, not just by sight. Every one of us is called to do that...nothing more than that.

And the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that our scattering and our planting will help yield nothing less than the strong, sturdy, and glorious Kingdom of God. It will bloom and grow all around—like a miracle! With God's help, it will spread out around the earth...as it is in heaven.

How does it happen? I no not know.

But it *does happen*—for the glory of God and for the blessing of God's people!

Amen.