



Introduction

The mustard seed becomes a great shrub that shelters the birds, recalling ancient images of the tree of life. We'd expect a cedar or a sequoia, but Jesus finds the power of God better imaged in a tiny, no-account seed. It's not the way we expect divine activity to look. Yet the tree of life is here, in the cross around which we gather, the tree into which we are grafted through baptism, the true vine that nourishes us with its fruit in the cup we share. It may not appear all that impressive, but while nobody's looking it grows with a power beyond our understanding.

Confession and Forgiveness

In the name of the Father, and of the ✚ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

God of all mercy and consolation, come to the help of your people, turning us from our sin to live for you alone.

Give us the power of your Holy Spirit that we may confess our sin, receive your forgiveness, and grow into the fullness of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. **Amen.**

Let us confess our sins in the presence of God and one another.

Most merciful God,

we confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves.

We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone.

We have not loved you with our whole heart;

we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us.

Forgive us, renew us, and lead us,

so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name. Amen.

God, who is rich in mercy, loved us even when we were dead in sin, and made us alive together with Christ. By grace you have been saved.

In the name of ✚ Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven.

Almighty God strengthen you with power through the Holy Spirit, that Christ may live in your hearts through faith. **Amen**

Opening Hymn ELW # 807 / LBW # 499 *Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing*

Listen and sing along [here](#).

Prayer of the Day

O God, you are the tree of life, offering shelter to all the world. Graft us into yourself and nurture our growth, that we may bear your truth and love to those in need, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. **Amen.**

First Reading: Ezekiel 17:22-24

Tree imagery is used in a messianic prophecy to tell how the LORD will choose someone from Judah's royal family (the cedar tree) to reign over all creation. This tree will be planted on Mount Zion, the location of the holy temple.

Read the complete text [here](#).

Psalm: Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15

- ¹It is a good thing to give thanks to the LORD,
to sing praise to your name, O Most High;
²**to herald your love in the morning and your faithfulness at night;**
³on the psaltery, and on the lyre, and to the melody of the harp.
⁴**For you have made me glad by your acts, O LORD;
and I shout for joy because of the works of your hands.**
¹²The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree,
and shall spread abroad like a cedar of Lebanon.
¹³**Those who are planted in the house of the LORD
shall flourish in the courts of our God;**
¹⁴they shall still bear fruit in old age; they shall be green and succulent;
¹⁵**that they may show how upright the LORD is,
my rock, in whom there is no injustice.**

Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, [11-13], 14-17

Paul encourages believers to live by faith and not by sight. We do not consider Jesus from a human perspective but through the eyes of faith, believing he died for all and was raised. All who are in Christ are now in God's new creation.

Read the complete text [here](#).

Gospel: Mark 4:26-34

Jesus frequently uses parables to teach ordinary people as they are able to hear and understand. Images of sowing and growing show the vitality of God's kingdom.

Read the complete text [here](#).

Reflection on the Text

If you have ever sat through Sunday School or Bible Study with me, you know that parables are not my favorite texts from scripture. They have a purpose, and they do make us think, as they were designed to do, but do they have to be so hard to figure out? Even the easy ones are not always what we think they are, and in fact, most are ones that we will never know for sure what they mean until Jesus comes again to explain them.

It would be a lot easier if Jesus had just said what he wanted us to hear, but then, that is the point of the parable. A parable is designed to make us think, to test our assumptions, and to make us remember. A parable is literally a narrative contrast, a laying of one thought beside another to see what happens. They may not make sense right away, but we do tend to remember them. We also must remember the politically charged climate in which Jesus lived. Some things said too openly would have ended his time on earth much sooner.

The whole of chapter 4 of Mark's gospel is made up of parables. Some long, some short, some more easily understood than others. Our parables today are short and they are easily misunderstood. First, there is the language used. What we translate from the Greek as "the kingdom of God" can actually be understood in other ways. Kingdom is translated from the word *basileia*. While kingdom sounds very noble, it also seems to describe something that is static and unchanging, whereas the *basileia* of God is more dynamic, referring the reign of God, or rule of God. While kingdom seems to describe a particular place, the reign of God is much more fluid, much more portable.

Second, parables as told by Jesus by necessity need to fall into the "now and not yet" category. While we believe the kingdom of God, or the reign of God is near, has come near, and will yet come near, we cannot pin it down to a particular place or time. Again, it is much more fluid than "now."

Our first parable certainly is not one that occurs in any specific place or time, but more in all places and times. Seeds are always planted, and usually, they grow. Unless we study the science behind seeds, we do not always understand how long it takes them to grow, and how weather patterns affect their growth. Warm weather with adequate rain is normally what makes them grow the best, but too much heat or too much rain and they don't grow as well, if at all. There always seems that there is much about growing seeds that we may not understand completely. There are many variables involved and we do not always allow for them.

The same holds true for the mustard seed. We are always told how small it is, but in reality, there are many seeds that are smaller. The mustard seed works well for the parable because it is both something that can be grown intentionally as a crop (what good is a hot dog without mustard?) but it is also something that can unintentionally take over and become a nuisance. It is, however, a large enough plant for birds to nest in and from a small seed, that is a miracle of its own.

The question for us is, how do **we** understand these parables? Most of us have some experience planting seeds in our garden or fields, and we know how to help them grow and when to harvest them, but how does that help us to understand faith, which is the point of the parable?

There are a couple of points for us to see in these parables. First, they do not specifically say who planted the seeds, or why? We might presume that it is because they produce something that is edible and would fill an empty belly, but that assumes much – good soil, enough but not too much rain, and so on. It assumes that we pay enough attention to the growth of the seeds to know when it is time to plant and when to harvest. Harvest too soon and there is not much to harvest; harvest too late and much of it will be gone. Paying attention and harvesting at the right time is crucial to having a good harvest.

The second is that while farming can be a stressful occupation, notice in these parables that no stress is evident. The seeds are planted, and then they are harvested. Everything that happens between planting and harvesting seems to be in someone else's control. This is faith.

We know that we are called to plant seeds – to share our faith stories and to invite others to come and see. Those are things that you have probably heard a few times. Notice that your job is planting. It is not necessarily your job to nurture, or to pull weeds, or even to make sure that the seeds you have planted get just the right amount of water. That is someone else's responsibility. God calls and provides others to do that. Your job is to plant.

As those seeds grow and mature, they become large plants, strong enough to hold and nurture others. Big enough so that it is obvious that the seeds have grown. If the seeds do not mature when we think they should, then we have faith that God is in control and things will happen in God's time.

The reign of God has come near, is now near, and will continue to come near. God is in control. We are just the planters of seeds, free to plant as many seeds as we can, and then wait and see what God does. Amen.

Hymn of the Day ELW # 679 / LBW # 563 *For the Fruit of All Creation*

Listen and sing along [here](#).

Apostles' Creed

We profess our faith with the whole church in all times and places:

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.**

**I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.**

**I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.**

Prayers of Intercession

Let us come before the triune God in prayer.

A brief silence.

Holy God, you plant the seeds of faith in every nation. Enliven your church, so that the good news of your grace may root and grow throughout the world.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Creator, even the trees, shrubs, and flowers delight in your goodness. From the depths of the soil to the highest mountain, bring forth new plants. Restore growth to places suffering drought. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Judge of nations, we pray for our leaders and those in power. Grant them the ability to regard those under their charge with humility, dedicating their lives in service to others. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Divine comforter, you show compassion to those in need and provide relief to those who call on you. Bless all who suffer, especially people trapped in cycles of poverty and homelessness. We pray for all those we name now.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Sovereign God, this house of worship belongs to you. We give thanks and pray for our church musician(s). We dedicate to you the joyful noise that comes from this place; the cries of children, the melody of voice and instruments, and the songs from our hearts. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Here other intercessions may be offered.

Eternal God, we give thanks for our ancestors in the faith who are now at home with you. We look forward to that day when we are reunited in your new creation. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**
We lift our prayers to you, O God, trusting in your abiding grace. **Amen.**

Lord's Prayer

Lord, remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come,
thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.**

Closing Hymn ELW # 763/ WOV # 781 *My Life Flows On in Endless Song*

Listen and sing along [here](#).

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Today's reflection was written by Pastor Ray Sipe.