

June 17, 2018 Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
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Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas

GOSPEL

Mark 4:26-34

The holy gospel according to Saint Mark, the fourth chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord

²⁶[Jesus] said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,²⁷ and 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.

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

This world is a horrible horrible mess of pain and struggle and wrong...

Some of what is horrible in this world

just seems randomly, recklessly senseless...

like the tragedy many of us now know

occurred not long before we gathered to worship last week...

the car accident that took the lives of three people...

including our dear one, Ben Hammer, and his wife, Alice.

Some of what is horrible is not so random...though it's no less troubling...

because it is the horror we enact upon each other and this earth...

It is the horribleness that we calculate and plan...

like the new cruel policy of tearing desperate families apart

who are seeking asylum in this country.

And, of course, none of this horribleness is actually new...

We were not safe from random tragedy before there were cars...
because there have always been tornadoes and hurricanes.
And we were not safe when someone else sat in the seats of power
in this country or the world...
because humans have committed many horrible acts
over the centuries of what we might be tempted to call civilization.
(I will pause to clarify, though, that
just because every regime and administration has done harm
does not excuse us from working to stop the harm being done
in any given moment.)

How do we stand...
as people of faith...as the children of our ancestors...
in the face of horror and find strength and hope?

Our ancestors before us faltered as much as we do.
When we come upon the people of Israel in First Samuel...
they are looking for a king to replace Saul...who has died shamefully...
and who God regrets ever making to be king.
This is, of course, after God warned the people
that they didn't really want a king...
that they would suffer under human rule...
that it wouldn't be what they hoped for.
But they had seen the commercials...
and kings look like the brightest, shiniest, best thing.
And bless their hearts. Those Israelites were so easily fooled.

I don't know about you...
but I have definitely wanted things I didn't really want before.
The most exciting commercial when I was a kid, that I can remember,
was for a Power Wheels car.
You could actually drive it...
for...you know...
maybe 20 minutes before the battery died...

Now, I don't know this because I ever got one.
I did not.
No. My parents were very concerned about safety...
in addition to thinking it was a dumb use of \$200 or whatever.

No.
I know how quickly the battery on the Power Wheels dies

because 8 years later...
my little brother got one.
So, yeah...I still have some feelings about that.

At the time, it seemed unfair...
and my very earliest feminist suspicions may have also crept in
that somehow he got the cool car thing because he was the boy.
After some years of reflection, though....
I think it was probably mostly that my parents' concerns for safety
had been somewhat worn down by the past decade of child-rearing.
And they had seen that we were pretty rubbery and resistant to breaking,
for the most part.

But I know one other thing that I didn't learn
until my brother got a Power Wheel.
And that is... I didn't want one.

It took almost no time at all trying to ride in it
to realize it was hard to control and a little scary and very bumpy...
and looked much cooler in the commercials...
and I am honestly relieved, to this day,
that my parents knew better than I did what I both needed and wanted
(or didn't) in that way.
God knows, too, that we don't really want a king...even when we do.
God knows that human rulers will amass power
and use it for the wrong things.

And it takes no time at all for Israel to witness this for itself,
and God regrets giving in and getting us Power Wheels
when God knew full well it wasn't what we needed or wanted.

So, at this moment of regret
God tries to turn our attention again toward another way of being
in choosing David as king.
He tries to start again...to change what kingship looks like.
He takes someone who is no one...
who is considered so little
that his family doesn't even think to call him in
to be counted among the sons of the family
when Samuel comes to meet them.

And David seems to begin his story so humbly
that he never even voices an objection to being cast aside or forgotten.
He is used it.

Which reminds me of a scene near the end of the movie *Hidden Figures*...
(Spoiler alert...But it's been out for over a year and a half...
so if I'm spoiling it for you now you only have yourself to blame...
but seriously...watch it sometime).

Katherine Johnson has endured years
of hard work and struggle trying to claim her rightful place
as a brilliant black woman among the crowd of white men
working at the most elite levels of computation at NASA
to get a man into orbit.

Despite her genius, doors close in her face over and over again,
but she continues to do her work and earn every drop of respect
she can squeeze out of the racist world that surrounds her.
And, in the end, her assistance is requested in verifying figures
that will make or break John Glenn's mission to orbit the earth.
She races through thousands of complex computations
and runs to the team waiting to confirm the launch.

She hands stacks of paper through the door
into the control room for the mission...and they rush on...
able to proceed because of her great mind...
even as the door is left to literally close in her face.
And one of the most heartbreaking moments of that film for me is when...
even after everything she has done to earn their respect,
she is so accustomed to not getting it...
that when the door closes, she takes a breath,
but she doesn't knock to be let in...
she turns around to walk away, because she is so used to closed doors.
Thankfully, someone on the other side of the door
remembers how to be a decent human and opens it to call her in.
But what breaks my heart is that, if they hadn't,
she wouldn't have been surprised.

David, too, would probably have shrugged his shoulders
and accepted rejection of his kingship if it had come to that...
but God chooses him for precisely this reason...
to show people that humble leadership from those we think of least

might carry us farther than anything we would choose.

And, of course, we know from David's story...
that once he tastes power and privilege, it corrupts even him, too.

And so, generations later...a shoot from the stump of Jesse...
from the line of David...will come to show us the fullness
of what David's rule could have been,
if not for the intoxicating power sin weilds over us.

Jesus comes to tell us about a kingdom like one we have never seen...
And have never managed to create...
And he can only speak about it in layers of metaphor and poetry...
in parables...because it is so unlike what we know.

The kingdom being like a mustard seed must have sounded like such a joke...
an invasive weed...an unprofitable crop...not useless, exactly...
(I mean, mustard is delicious)
but nothing anyone trying to make a living would plant on purpose.
The tiny seed that grows into a noble shrub...
It would be like saying...
the kingdom of heaven is like a mighty dachhund
perched on the throne of the arm of the sofa, ruling over all she sees...
or the kingdom of heaven is like the fierce snorts of the boston terrier
warning intruders of her mighty power.

There is nothing impressive about mustard bushes. Okay?
Not by our terms. Jesus is being ridiculous.

And I have to admit...even after hearing this parable all my life,
I had still missed most of it.
When I first told this parable in a Godly Play training...
I got to the part about the birds making nests in the bush's branches...
and I got annoyed...
(because I hadn't yet absorbed and believed
how attentive the language of Godly Play is
to what's in the original texts of the Scriptures...)
and I thought to myself,
"What is this weird thing about birds doing in the parable?
Who added that part in?"

You see, I had been so concerned...

 trying to take Jesus seriously about the size and power of this weed...
 that I hadn't noticed that Jesus is trying to redirect us
 and show us how the kingdom is like a nuisance plant,
that invades your garden and offers no profit to you,
 but rather a home to birds
 that chirp right outside your bedroom window at the crack of dawn.
The kingdom is like a tiny, forgotten thing that gets into your life
 and won't go away and doesn't do anything you find useful...
 but brings in all kinds of things you never asked for.

Where are the ones who are tiny, invisible, forgotten,
 unimportant, dishonored, annoying, unprofitable?
There, my friends, is the kingdom of God.

How do we stand...
 as people of faith...as the children of our ancestors...
 in the face of horror and find strength and hope?
Where can we glimpse the kingdom of God? What is it like?

The kingdom of God is like Jesus...
 when we think we don't want it...
 when we are afraid of it or threatened by it...
 when we close the door on it without a second thought...
 when we want to put it out of sight in hopes it will go away...
 we may try to bury it...
but when we do, it is only because we forget that it is a seed.

Friends, in these parables...
 in the story of our ancestor David...
 in our world today...
 is a promise and a challenge.

That which the world calls worthless is not.
 And when we draw on that promise for hope...
we can water the seeds and welcome the birds...
 we can be the one who remembers to open the door
 to the one forgotten on the other side...
 maybe we can even be the ones
 who stop the door from closing to begin with.
The world is hurting too much.

May we all live with the strength and hope
that trusts God's power come to us from the most unexpected places.
Thanks be to God. Amen.