

The Kingdom of God is Growing Right Under Your Feet
Sermon preached on Sunday, June 13, 2021, 3rd Pentecost
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The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground and would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. Mark 4:26-27
AMEN

What if a miracle is happening right under your feet? Holy and mysterious, out of your control, yet right under your feet?

I am not a gardener. My mother is a gardener with a green thumb, but I am embarrassed to admit that I do not have that gift. In fact, even plants that are allegedly hard to kill, like succulents and cacti, are not safe in my care.

Nevertheless, there are some amazing success stories of thriving plant life in my yard. For instance, I have a couple of beautiful lantanas that are flourishing there. Every winter, after their flowers and leaves have fallen off and their branches are dry, dead twigs, I cut them all the way to the ground. It's the only direct interaction I have then them all year. And every year, they come back. All the way back - branches, leaves, flowers - to the full height or higher than the year before.

I also have tropical banana plants that survive every winter - even after the deep freeze we had this February. There is no reason they should pulled through. Even a normal winter here is not what they are built for, but they come back again and again. Their runners travel through the soil and shoots pop up in new places every spring and all summer long.

Now, in my particular case, this can be considered a miracle. Because as I mentioned, plants tend to die in my care, or my neglect, or both. Yet these plants are thriving. There are people who are better at this than I am, and people who know the science behind how and why plants thrive or die in any given circumstance. They know what mysteries happen in the dark soil out of sight.

And yet, no matter how much any of us know or how skilled at gardening we are, there is still a mystery to the life cycles of flowers and trees, to grass or moss, to vines and ferns. Part of the mystery is that the key action happens out of our control - seeds sprout buried in the soil, the sun shines or doesn't, rain falls or doesn't.

I think this is why scripture so often uses images of gardens and trees and plant life of all kinds to help us understand God and our relationship with God. There's a part of it that is not up to us.

Look at Ezekiel's prophecy to the exiled community in Babylon:

- They have been taken from their homeland by a hostile foreign power and their capital has been destroyed. Soon their Temple - the very dwelling place of God - will be razed.
- The reason for this disaster, the people of Israel are told by multiple prophets, is that they have violated their covenant with God. In particular, they have neglected the care of the most vulnerable people in their midst. Widows, orphans, strangers.
- To this uprooted people Ezekiel uses the image of a tree to say: God will replant you. God will take a clipping from the grand tree you once were and from it grow a new fruitful tree. And under this tree every kind of bird will live.

There are two things about this vision that stand out to me. First of all, it is God who will restore the tree of Israel, not the people themselves. God takes the sprig and God plants it.

Thus says the Lord God:

I myself will take a sprig

I myself will plant it

The people can take part and like birds nest in its branches, but the work, the growth, is God's.

The second thing I notice about Ezekiel's vision is that the new Israel will embody a restored covenant. This "tree" will be a haven for every kind of bird. It will shade every kind of winged creature. A people who turned from God by turning from their neighbors, will now re- turn toward God by welcoming all.

It is no surprise that, like Ezekiel, Jesus would use similar imagery of planting and new growth to teach his followers about the kingdom of God. In his parables, Jesus teaches:

- The kingdom of God is like seeds that grow as if on their own, while the gardener is asleep.
- And the kingdom of God is like an abundant miracle that grows from the very smallest imaginable seed.
- And, as in Ezekiel, this bush, this tree, is a haven for birds of the air.

Again, the growth from the sprig in Ezekiel's image and the seed in Jesus' parable happens in a mysterious way. It is the work of God, not of us. And this restored community, this kingdom of God, is a refuge. It is a place of welcome and refreshment.

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.

Sometimes in scripture and in our imaginations, the kingdom of God is envisioned as being far off in time and in place, as being in the sky and in the future. Yet these parables describe a kingdom that is not of our making and nevertheless is being cultivated in our midst. It is welcoming and earthy. Jesus' parables describe the kingdom of God as being like seeds germinating in the soil; the kingdom of God is growing right under our feet!

Parables in scripture are meant to stretch our imaginations about God and our relationship with God. Parables compare things we understand to things that are beyond our understanding to help us see them better.

So, if these parables describe God's promises to us, God's kingdom, where do we see ourselves in them?

Perhaps we are the sprig of a lofty cedar tree and small as a mustard seed.

Like the exiled community in Babylon, we have not always been faithful to God, but God is faithful to us. We find ourselves stranded in a hostile place through our own actions, longing to be restored.

The surprise of God's grace is that restoration comes from a small, tender sprig. From the smallest, most vulnerable clipping, our being with God will grow into a towering tree.

Like the early Christian community we can sometimes feel small as a mustard seed, insignificant and powerless. Like them, we are a scruffy group of fearful, doubting people who don't understand much of what Jesus says. And yet, it is from this seed that the kingdom will be made known. There is hope for us in this image of life growing from the smallest seed and at the hand of God.

Maybe we are the empire.

Let's face it. In many ways, Christians today are in the position of Babylon and Rome, not the small Jewish or early Christian communities we read about in the

Bible. In much of the world today, followers of Jesus are in positions of military, political, and economic power - we are the tall cedars, not the sprig.

One thing we learn from the prophets and from Jesus is that God's action of restoration comes AFTER all else has been tried and fallen through. None of the "kingdoms" of our making are the kingdom of God. And that is a relief, because our empires don't turn out so well.

Again and again the story of faith is one of God upsetting our expectations. It is a story of hope coming from the least likely places. Not from power, but from tender care, not from lofty heights, but from the soil.

We are invited to open our imaginations to the ways the kingdom of God will be more generous, more hospitable than whatever empire we are experiencing now.

We are the birds.

Both Ezekiel and Jesus use this wonderful image of the restored community, the kingdom of God being a place where birds rest in the shade. In Austin in June it is not hard for us to identify with the idea that shade is life-giving! I don't know about you, but I spend a good deal of my summer time looking for it.

Think about this image. All kinds of birds resting on the branches, in the shade of lush trees. Birds don't plant the trees or make them grow. The haven they find is not something they created or can hoard for themselves. It is a gift.

The kingdom is also a haven, a refuge, a place of protection for all. The kingdom brings life and resurrection and abundance for exiles and empires.

For us here today, this means that no matter how inclusive we imagine our Christian community to be right now, the kingdom is more than that!

So, what if a miracle is happening right under your feet? Holy and mysterious, out of your control? My friends, it most surely is. Like a seed germinating in the soil, like a sprig that becomes a tree, and like my lantana that resuscitates every spring, the kingdom of God is percolating right under our feet.

The kingdom is already planted. It is for us to join God in it and share it with all the other birds. AMEN