

Mark 4:30-32

He also said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet 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.’ With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

“The Greatest Shrub”

Yesterday started out as a nice day off. I worked in my garden and mowed my yard. Next I went to get stamps at the post office and wrote letters. Then in the afternoon I got online to download some resources for a premarital counseling session I have this afternoon and that was when my laptop went ballistic.

Something happened that has never happened to me before. My computer just wouldn’t reboot. After about four hours of struggle I called it quits. My laptop was only going to be resurrected by a professional—on Monday. I knew it was not the end of the world, but my sermon and worship notes for today, were lying within my frozen laptop. There is no other way to put it, I got mad. It didn’t help that it was about 88 degrees in my office at home. My laptop was hot; I was hot. This was not my vision for my day off!

After some groans and “why me” bellyaching I drove here to my trusty office computer and attempted to resurrect what I could remember from the sermon I had written.

I realized last night that the letdown of what happens when what you are expecting isn’t realized, could be a metaphor for how the disciples must have felt upon hearing the Parable of the Mustard Seed.

Now Jesus knew the stories and promises of God passed down by his ancestors. One such story from Ezekiel went like this. During the Babylonian exile God promised Israel that one day a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar would be planted on a high mountain. It would grow strong, bear fruit, and become a “noble cedar.” Every bird, every winged creature would be able to live in its branches and also in its shade. From the noble cedar’s great growth all the other trees, the other nations, would finally know that Israel’s God was the Lord. The people of God would be low no more. They would flourish like the noble cedar, high up and lofty, looking out over the rest of the world.

Jesus must have known the story of the cedar! Yet he taught his disciples this parable instead, “With what can we compare the reign of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all....shrubs.” The reign of God a great shrub? The branches of this “shrub” aren’t even strong enough to hold the weight of one bird of the air. Instead they make their nests in its shade!

It is helpful to remember that Mark inserted a disclaimer for the reader right after this parable. He tells us that even Jesus’ closest disciples, the apostles, needed him to explain the meaning of such parables to them in private.

What happened to the noble cedar? This is a parable about God’s reign? What was Jesus thinking?

My first thought is that Jesus is simply being realistic about God's reign working through humans. Being a noble cedar is lofty work—few are capable of. I find Jesus' downsizing of the way we participate in the coming reign of God encouraging. After all if we are to be part of this reign a shrub sure fits my efforts better than a noble cedar.

Or did he change the image for another reason? Not realism about our small efforts of showing forth God's reign, but to illustrate another point? Maybe he remembered the story of David's anointing and how God set a path for a way forward in that time and place. How the littlest brother, the youngest, who wasn't even brought in from shepherding in the fields when Samuel told Jesse to bring all his sons to him, was chosen to lead God's people. Maybe Jesus was reflecting his own experience of God's movement in him. After all Jesus' way was one of strength shown through weakness and reliance on God.

The people expected the promise of the noble cedar; that God would pluck and plant and it would be obvious to all the nations that Israel's God reigned. Jesus offered a new promise that God's reign would unfold in a subversive way that makes no sense to the worldly powers that be. Instead of God instituting sweeping reform and God's glory showing through a mighty tree lording over other trees, the disciples are now to be a part of the coming of God's reign making it known through the means of...the greatest shrub.

The reign of God comes as glory is seen in weakness, as the oppressed overcome the oppressor and all people live and thrive together for the common good! The reign of God does not shine through of the hopes of this world—aspirations of power, prestige and military might. Imagine giving a speech of the glory of becoming a great shrub as a graduation address. People would think the speaker was crazy. A glorious shrub—that is aspiration to a “successful” life in our culture?

God's reign does not replicate the kind of greatness we are drawn to. Instead its power is manifest in weakness, and its glory is shown as an unmerited gift is received and transforms the life of the recipient. God's rule does not have to be sanctioned by the great and powerful in the world. Most of the time it is in opposition to the interests of the powerful!

During my time at Princeton Theological Seminary I learned about a new global black-market; Sexual Slavery and Sex Tourism. A petite, blond woman named Lisa came to PTS each year to enlist support to end the flourishing business of this growing form of modern day slavery. Lisa works for the Salvation Army as their lobbyist to abolish global sex slavery. The Salvation Army is probably the leading Christian organization on this issue in the world. Lisa is their main voice. She educates and connects people working to end sex slavery and lobbies congress to pass legislation that will effect change. There is little monetary or persuasive reward for those in power in our country and around the world to tackle the atrocity of sex slavery. It is more lucrative than selling drugs. Humans can be used over and over, whereas drugs can only be used once. After Lisa's presentation a student asked, “Don't you get disillusioned, they have all this money, there is so much corruption of police and governments that turn a blind eye! How are we ever going to make a dent?” I'll never forget Lisa's answer. She responded, “I cling to the small stories of hope from women and children freed from sexual enslavement. I focus on the small ways leaders are beginning to resist turning a blind eye. I cling to my hope, my faith, my belief that by following God all things are made possible.” Then she said, “This is God's work we are doing! We have abundant resources because God is with us. So if I

have the support of one policeman in India and the brothel has five bodyguards, I still must believe a way will open up—God’s work has always been done by the underdog.” The greatest shrub is manifest in Lisa’s work and witness! In the biblical stories of the coming of the reign of God the concept of worldly power is always turned upside down. The powers that be are made impotent by the power of God at work for the wholeness of the world.

There are plenty of stories of despair in the world, but the gospel is filled with hope! Hope that the reign of God can be shown forth as it breaks into the world with the subversive power...of a great shrub.

This week I found that the Democrat and Chronicle showed forth the greatness possible from a shrub view of the world by dedicating a whole page to celebrate the achievements of the Urban League’s Black scholar awards in Rochester. This photomontage spoke truth to me. What a beautiful shrub-like move made by our region’s paper. There were also stories of student who went from the Harley School to serve in the Missionaries of Charity Home for the dying in Calcutta. Oh—the greatest shrub shining forth! There was a story of students who learned lessons of tolerance for those who differ from them by going on a March of Remembrance and Hope in Poland with their professors from Nazareth and Hobart and William Smith. The great shrub blooms again! Stories of hope press us forward and onward to prune and grow new branches in our own discipleship.

Even when fully grown the kingdom of God found in the greatest of all shrubs will not appear very large when compared to a Great Oak down Nations Road. Yet this parable suggests that Jesus’ disciples can find the secret of the reign of God in their present experience. God has already provided protection for the faithful. Now Jesus invites us to construct our own understanding of discipleship and to be a part of the growing pattern of the greatest shrub as it busts and breaks apart the forces of evil in the world and points instead to God doing an ever new thing. Amen.