



Pentecost 4 – Proper 6 (B)

Mustard Seed

[RCL] Ezekiel 17:22-24; Psalm 92:1-4,11-14; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, [11-13], 14-17; Mark 4:26-34

Note: During the 2024 Season after Pentecost, Sermons That Work will use Track 2 readings for sermons and Bible studies. Please consult our archives for many additional Track 1 resources from prior years.

Oh, the mustard seed. Like tiny granules of salt or yeast, Jesus often uses the illustration of something tiny and unassuming—like a mustard seed—to demonstrate the power of God. In the Gospel according to Mark, we hear about the mustard seed in the context of the Kingdom, or Vision, of God. The Gospel of Mark begins with Jesus announcing, “The kingdom of God has come near,” and then telling a series of parables to describe what that vision looks like. And because God’s power can never be reduced to human language, even through centuries of translation and editing, Jesus makes sure to use stories and contexts that his audience would recognize. In these particular explanations of the Vision of God, Jesus enlists the help of a lowly mustard seed.

His audience would certainly have been familiar with these minuscule seeds, harbored in thin pods that burst and sprout new mustard plants—spreading so easily that the growth is difficult to control! Jesus uses this weed, an invasive crop, to describe the Vision of God. It starts grassroots, tiny, almost casual— it doesn’t take up too much room. And then moves and grows into a power and movement that can’t be contained!

When we examine our own little seeds—of faith, of strength, of power, of community—it can be a risk to fall into the trap of thinking solely in terms of *potential*. That my seed is powerful when or if it grows into something more majestic, like a cedar, or more insistent, like a mustard crop. But we can recognize that our small stirrings are powerful in themselves. Sometimes a seed is a seed, not a metaphor for dramatic potential and growth and development. Think about the poppy seeds on a bagel, the superfood chia seeds in a smoothie, yes, the mustard seeds that pop and mash in a recipe— these seeds add texture and flavor and interest to life without having to grow into something more exciting!

Outside of the kitchen, the seeds in the garden require a bit more from us. We can peruse our seed catalogs, make ambitious plans, create cute labels for the plots and pots, plant, compost, water, weed, protect, tend, and nurture those little baby seeds with the expectation that they become shoots and sprouts

and then maybe food, or beauty, or both. Jesus describes the sower having scattered the seeds to plant, then the seed sprouting and growing, as would be expected, but then says something upon which the whole parable hinges: the sower “does not know how.” The sower can do their part in planting and tending, but the growth comes in the mystery of God. In the original meaning of the word, the seed grows “automatically,” or, “of itself.”

“We do not know how.” Such growth requires comfort in mystery, and trust in God. We might never see the ten thousand tiny actions that contribute to a transformation from a seed to a flower. We may never see the flower, leaving the seed forever sown in hope and expectation. Growth and transformation are not our responsibility; they are God’s gifts to us. We must do our part to tend and care, but the mystery of faith gives us freedom and perhaps even relief. We do now know how, and we do not need to.

Letting go of the need to “know how” brings life to the Psalmist’s song. Shout out God’s loving kindness and faithfulness! God’s works have inspired us to flourish, have grown plants that fruit and flower, have made me glad. I do not know how, but it happens, and because of that I will shout for joy!

Through a caring ecosystem that can provide soil and water and air and sun, and the mystery of God’s flourishing love, the mustard seed grows and matures into a giant tree or shrub, so hardy it harbors other species in its branches. Upon first glance at that minuscule seed, one might never imagine the strength and stubbornness of the mature plant! Even a tiny sprig, with God’s love and grace, can become a noble cedar.

Centuries before Jesus, in the Hebrew Scripture today, we also hear of a vision of a noble cedar tree. Like Jesus and the best storytellers, the prophet and priest Ezekiel uses illustrations that are familiar to his audience, like a cedar. Israel at this point was a war zone, fluctuating in loyalty and leadership, and the Jewish people had been exiled. Ezekiel speaks to them in a prophetic parable. He knows the days of the Temple of Jerusalem are numbered, but also knows that it is not the end of the people or their covenant with God. After death and destruction, Ezekiel envisions Yahweh reinstating the holy temple, allowing the people to worship together once again.

The sprig from a fallen tree – and the ruins of a destroyed temple – will exhibit a life force that goes beyond human destruction, will grow on a lofty mountain, proud and straight. And then the branches of that cedar will, like the mustard shrub, provide shade and shelter for others. As long as there is life, there is hope. Even a fallen tree amid war and exile can, by God’s mystery, grow into something strong and powerful, so much so that it can provide for others.

The weight of saving the world is not on us. Jesus already saved us, through his death and resurrection we celebrate each year at Easter. Jesus will save us again and again, every day and all day, for reasons and in ways we can never understand. Our job is not to make the plants grow. Our role is to sow the seeds, plant the seeds, tend them with faith, and rest in their provision. We do not know, and we do not need to know,

how the plants will grow and flourish. We need to know that God will cause the sprigs to become mighty cedars.

“The Theologian’s Almanac” by The Salt Project sums it up like this: “The seeds grow, however, whether within us or outside us, by God’s grace alone. For any of us who are overburdened with worry about the future, or who stress over the adequacy (or inadequacy) of our own efforts, this comes as consoling, reassuring good news.”

That *is* the good news! That we may walk by faith, faith in the mysterious power of God, and not by sight, the sight of the hows and whys. Faith that Christ has died for us, given us relief and freedom, and is constantly growing and rooting the seeds that we sow. Everything has become new, and thanks be to God, we “do not know how.” May we all understand the transformative and life-giving power of God, and rest under the mustard tree and the cedar trees, knowing what we know and having faith in what we don’t.

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