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Mark 4:26-34

D. Jacobsen. "Mark 4:26-34."

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David Schnasa Jacobsen

6/13/2021 Third Sunday after Pentecost – Ord. 11 Year B Mark 4:26-34

The seedy parables of Mark 4:26-34 may be mysterious, but they have an equally tricky referent: the Kingdom of God. This seems to me an unusual complication for preachers. Ideally a parable puts two things side by side so one clear thing helps to explain the other unclear thing. But what if the Kingdom of God (a mystery if there ever was one) is likened to various seed parables that themselves feel largely opaque. Seedy, mysterious parables are fine, but they seem unlikely to help illuminate something like the Kingdom of God.

Fortunately, our cultural imaginations help us out a bit. Parables of sowers and seeds may seem quaint now to us, but in the history of art they were much beloved. Van Gogh's "The Sower" is mysterious, but somehow also luminous. There is something mysterious haunting the ordinary in that famous work of art. Yet even Van Gogh's painting doesn't compare to the imaginative disclosure we once likely learned in elementary school. Even city kids did this one: just place a bean seed in a little paper cup filled with soil, wait a few days, and watch. What is mysterious about that paper cup seed is what exactly what helped give the seed imagistic life in the ancient world: it's a discontinuous miracle. You put a seed in the dark ground and, poof, like magic it turns into something else: something green, thriving, perhaps even spreading across the ground.

This discontinuous nature of the seed is part of what Mark wants to get at with his apocalyptic mindset. A seed once planted is a mystery in that it unfolds by its own operation in the soil. Planters may sleep and rise, but a seed's work is really automatic, as the Greek word in

Mark 4:28 speaks like some cognate homonym. What's apocalyptic about that? It's cosmic timetables. As NT scholar Joel Marcus points out, the automatic idea of the seed first sprouting, showing a head, and then giving seed is a commonplace of apocalyptic literature.¹ The emergence of the seed in its sequenced growth is like the Kingdom of God in this sense: it grows of its own accord and appears on God's timetable (not yours or mine). The divine reign is apocalyptic and automatic.

But the seed metaphors don't stop there, they just keep coming in Mark 4:30-32 are no exception. The mustard seed parable seeks to explicate the mystery in a further sense: its growth also appears and spreads "all of a sudden." Mustard seeds have the beautiful quality of being small seeds with spreading results—in this text sprawling enough to include shade for all those gentile birds of heaven, too! Along the way, the eccentric comparison provides a little edginess in that not a few powerful nations liked to compare themselves to great cedar trees. The mustard seed decolonizes by comparison. It is short, scruffy, and small; but it is also in Mark's sanctified imagination sprawling and sufficient for shade—just like this mysterious Kingdom of God.

This is where we often come in, especially if we are persons of privilege. We may not be apocalyptic people, but we like to tag along for a little harvest joy with our seed. The image gives us hope in the seed's own automatic trajectory of growth. People like Theodore Parker, Martin Luther King, and even Barack Obama might well agree, even if their words and images differ: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Whatever the Kingdom of God is, it is indeed like a seed that grounds our hope that eventually things can

¹ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8* (The Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 328.

change. The universe has a bending arc to point you toward it. That kind of hope can get you through a difficult patch. And even a seedy kingdom sounds good enough.

The funny thing is that the context of Mark itself would seem to preclude that kind of hope. Most scholars agree Mark was written close to the destruction of the Temple. The conflicts and dangers that Mark stipulates seem to reflect a context where public chaos has untethered conventional identities for Jesus followers, pharisees, scribes, and crowds alike. In that context, the seed as a parable for the Kingdom of God seems almost detached. How did Sarah Palin put it during the Tea Party hey day: “How’s that hopey changey stuff working out?”² A seed like Mark’s is nice, but not much in the midst of Jerusalem ruins and social chaos.

To my mind, the present context poses the same questions for seedy eschatologies and Kingdom hope—even edgy Markan apocalyptic ones. As I write this, the testimony in the George Floyd killing haunts just about any hope I’ve every harbored. In the videos, you can see the EMT, the young children, the martial arts expert, and the convenience store cashier lined up pleading with the white policeman kneeling on a black man’s neck to stop and render assistance to George Floyd. Can all they do is to cry out and plead, but effect nothing? One of the young girls relegated to the sidewalk testifies that she apologizes over and over again to George Floyd at night. She asks herself why she could not have done more? Why did the pleading or the yelling not suffice? The haunting makes the mysterious parable hard to hear. What about this seedy hope of an automatic Kingdom of God?

In truth, this apocalyptic text is powerful, but is itself likewise haunted by twenty-one centuries more of pain an injustice. Now the destruction of the Temple is only overloaded with

² <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=123462728>. Accessed on April 4, 2021.

generation upon generation of loss and trauma. How do we ever get through the hauntings we experience and still hold to some seedy Kingdom hope?

There is one thing I lay hold of. There may well be an arc of the moral universe that bends toward toward justice. But that view is rightly both a promise and a goad. The famous quote from Parker and King and Obama uses the intransitive verb, “bend,” but there’s no one who can say that *we* can’t lay hold of that arc and in the name of the promise bend it a little bit ourselves with a little transitive joy inspired by the coming harvest. As I see it, doing so would also make sense of Mark’s vision of a deep, dirty, and dead context and an unlikely sprawling seed, for now, growing in a paper cup that we are empowered to provide.

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