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Pentecost 04 B, June 16, 2024

Pathway to God's Kingdom

Read: Mark 4: 20 – 35 and/or memorize: Mark 4: 25

Jacob knew nothing of the geography that stretched beyond his farmland to the great sea. He didn't even know that the great sea existed, westward beyond his land. Neither he, or anyone in his village of fifteen stone houses, had ever been more than a half day's journey from home.

Jacob only knew of the fields and gentle slopes of land that he could see as he paused in the hard work of seed planting. While he did not know the far-reaching geography, Jacob did know about seed time and harvest. And he knew his limits.

Once the winter rain slowed, Jacob would prepare the ground for planting. But before he started his work, he fasted, preparing himself for the task of preparing the land. It was what the proscribed rituals required.

The farm tool that he used was almost as ancient as the ritual. It was a thick, heavy tree, limb, tipped with iron, given to him by his father, years earlier. The donkey pulled it, with Jacob ever forcing it into the earth. Together, they would break the clods of earth, turning the grasses inward.

His fieldwork took more than the days between two sabbaths to finish – and that was with good weather. When the ground was broken, he would place the carefully stored seed into a bag that he slung over his shoulder. Then, as he walked back-and-forth across the field, he would "broadcast" that precious seed. Each handful would be thrown with a sweeping swing of his arm. When he reached the far side of his field, the planting was done.

With the task completed, Jacob looked to the heavens, not with an eye of a modern agronomist and meteorologist, who could calculate studied prescriptions of soil quantity and weather to come. His look was one of resignation. He'd done his part, the only part he could do. Now God would have to do the growing. In his understanding, the land he worked was a gift from God! It did not really belong to him nor did the crops that came from his work.

But one day, his, and the village's ordinary routine of farming was broken into. The rabbi came along the path from the great sea, from Nazareth, although Jacob had never heard of Nazareth nor did he know it existed. The rabbi stopped at Jacob's field to talk. Jacob remembered that moment for the rest of his life.

Others also remembered it. Years later, they remembered Jesus' seed-teaching in terms of the growing of God's Kingdom upon earth. The divine in life grows. The heavenly on earth develops, like a seed growing toward maturity. God's Kingdom on earth was a very important part of Jesus teaching and so, I invite you, "Come, let us walk in the way of the Lord."

The Kingdom of God, by that title at least, is not mentioned anywhere in the Old Testament. It is seldom mentioned in the New Testament, except in the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John only mentioned it twice; Acts notes it six times. But the Kingdom of God or Kingdom of Heaven is a central part of the synoptic tradition,.

Jesus' preaching, as remembered in Matthew, Mark and Luke, is filled with allusions to God's rule upon earth, God's Kingdom. His teaching is understood in this way. It is something about to happen, which we call imminent, and something already arrived, eminent! God's kingdom is imminent as in the Lord's prayer, "Thy kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Jesus teaches us to understand that God's Kingdom is a present reality while, at the same time it is still coming.

Whereas, Jesus told the Pharisee's in Luke 17: 21 that it is eminent: "The kingdom of God is among you." In a paradoxical way, that seems true to life. God's working presence seems always to do with the immediate moment, as well as pulling us into a greater fulfillment in the faith blessed by God. The call of God moves us to greater blessings, ultimately from the kingdom upon earth to the Kingdom of Heaven.

In our two parables, we have Jesus' teaching on His kingdom. The Kingdom of God is mysterious growth. We do not have all the answers, there is always mystery with life, yet that does not keep the kingdom from being a reality. It is like the farmer, Jesus said, who plants the seed; then goes to sleep or goes away, and while he is gone, the life within the seed brings forth shoots, then plants; then the harvest. How does it do this? The farmer can't explain that. It is mysterious growth.

Those of us who are parents have seen that same mysterious growth. Remember that little baby you brought home? Ours are now 47 and 45, two of them have children of their own, one on the verge of being a teenager. We sometimes stand back and wonder, how can that be? How is it that those little babies, so helpless, who once upon time began life, are now the bringers of life for the next generation. I suspect that every parent looks at a child in such a wonder.

What we can see in physical growth, and marvel at, is also the story of spiritual growth, and of the growth of God's kingdom! The disciple band that clustered around Jesus revealed that growth. At first, they were workmen, toiling at daily tasks. Then they became students, disciples of their Lord. As they grew in understanding about God's Kingdom, they also misunderstood it. They denied knowledge of their confessed master. In fear, they hid because of Him. But as their growth continued, they moved out of their hiding to be called, not disciples, but apostles, the ones who are sent by the Lord to be His speakers.

This spiritual growth also takes place within our congregation. Through Sunday School and Bible study, through Growth Groups and teaching, through the many caring ministries and the people of this church, a spiritual Renaissance is marked upon many persons. It is the Kingdom of God breaking in, growing in ways we cannot fully understand or comprehend now. All we can know is that when seeds get planted, once planted, they can grow.

The Kingdom of God, in this mysterious growth, becomes something of great worth and service. It's like that tiny mustard seed that Jesus talks about in our Gospel, that when planted, grows into a great bush that is part of the value of nature. Even the birds of the air can use its protection for nesting.

I want to tell you an incredible story about the mysterious growth of God's Kingdom that resulted in a gift of great worth. This is a true story about another Jacob, not the Jacob of our sermon. On December 7, 1941 the Empire of Japan attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor. On April 18, 1942, into a gun – gray sky, sixteen B25 bombers took off from a pitching aircraft carrier deck and headed for the Empire of Japan to strike the first blow in retaliation for that attack at Pearl Harbor. They were under the command of Jimmy Dolittle.

They had to leave for the mission earlier than planned. Beginning about noon on that April 18, they made their strike and then, because of low fuel, continued on to the China mainland. Fuel ran out and the planes crashed. Most of those airmen were saved by friendly forces in China, but two of the planes crashed on Japanese – held land.

Both crews were captured. One plane's crew was killed, the crew of the other plane, plane 16, named, "Bat Out Of Hell" remained prisoners throughout the war. One of the five-man crew died in captivity. The other four were released after the destruction of Nagasaki on August 9, 1945.

One of those survivors was Jacob DeShazer. He was the bombardier of the plane. Deshazer's 3 years of captivity was the story of deprivation, torture and untreated illness. More than 70 boils covered his body. He became weak from dysentery. From the depth of that hell, he searched for God.

He would say, "The way the Japanese treated me I had to turn to Christ. No matter what they did to me, I prayed. I prayed for strength to live. I prayed for the strength to somehow, find forgiveness for what they were doing to me."

Somewhere in his youth, small seeds of God's work through Jesus Christ have been planted. I'm not sure even he could identify the time or the planter. We can speculate about it but it doesn't really matter. He learned about Jesus and that changed his life.

Somehow, in that mystery of spiritual influence, seed was planted that allowed Jacob to struggle with the mysterious growth of God's Kingdom in his own life, a growth that took place in a prison cell that was near hell. We are often surprised at how God's Kingdom grows out of difficulty, oppression, imprisonment, whether physical or emotional.

After his release, Jacob became a Christian missionary. For three decades, DeShazer ministered to bring the beliefs of God's Kingdom to, of all places, China and Japan. That seed continues to grow. In a curious twist, DeShazer was instrumental in the conversion of Mitsuo Fuchida, the Japanese pilot who had led the air attack on Pearl Harbor. In time, Fuchida himself became a Christian minister to his people in Japan.

Jesus taught about a tiny seed, once planted, growing in strange and mysterious, unaccountable ways, to become something of great worth to the world. In such a way, He said God's Kingdom is all around us and within us. We cannot study Jesus' teaching of God's rule without learning the big message that you and I are centrally involved in it.

Jesus believes strongly that God's Kingdom was the means of fulfilling God's broken creation. That blessed Kingdom offers the completion of God's creation, moving from earth to heaven. The Kingdom offers all that God desires for us. As we seek to grow close to Jesus, we are part of God's work through Jesus – we are also within the Kingdom.

And the invitation is always given. “Come, let us walk in the way of the Lord!” Even as we look forward to the Kingdom coming someday, as we grow through this week, we want to be attentive to the fact that the Kingdom is come. Every day you are sharing in the planting of seeds of God's love and Kingdom. But more, you will receive this week the blessings of other plantings. Those blessings are part of the walk, too.

Through it all, you are growing towards the harvest time – in your living now and in your claim to that eternal Kingdom of God's great love. It is a mystery. It is growth. God plants it in you, so that you may be part of that kingdom.

Count me in: What are you planting to help God's Kingdom grow in you now and for heaven?