

Ezekiel 17:22-24
Psalm 92:1-4, 11-14
Corinthians 5:6-17
Mark 4:26-34 Trinity, Sonoma

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It's a Mystery

Have you ever had the experience of having a word or an idea grab hold of you, and wherever you turn, wherever you look, there it is?

I have had this experience with the word *mystery*. I bumped into it in Advent when I read that the Annunciation is a Christian *mystery*; meant to be believed and lived rather than understood. I bumped into it again and again as the liturgical year unfolded: Incarnation, Transfiguration, Resurrection, Ascension. All mysteries. I bumped into it last week when we celebrated the mystery of the Trinity, God in three persons, unity and diversity, held together in love. The Christian faith is full of mysteries, stories meant to be *believed* and *lived* rather than understood.

So it is with parables, those teachings for which Jesus is famous. Those teachings which seem like they're supposed to make everything clear ... only they don't. At least they didn't for the disciples, and they don't for me either.

Now it's important not to use the word mystery as a cop out. We shouldn't avoid exploring or discussing important ideas just because we can't fully understand them. In the movie *Shakespeare in Love* there is a character who, whenever he's in trouble, tries to worm his way out of it by telling his tormentors that everything will work out. "How?" they ask. "I don't know," he replies, "it's a mystery." He *is* trying to get out of a jam, but he is also telling the truth. There are things we cannot understand ... sometimes all we can do is enter into the mystery of them and see what God will reveal.

In the gospel of Mark, the kingdom of God is described only twice ... it's referred to other times, but it's only described twice ... and today's gospel holds both those descriptions, in the form of parables. The kingdom of God is like seeds scattered, a mustard seed sown. It is like these things, but it is not these things. Even Jesus, who is in complete communion with God the Father, doesn't have the ability or the language to express exactly what the kingdom of God is. He must rely on poetry and parables: "The kingdom of God is *as if* someone would scatter seed on the ground. It is *like* a mustard seed when sown upon the ground."

On first reading there are familiar themes here.

Small seeds can grow into something big. When I was a girl I had one of those necklaces with a small object, alleged to be a mustard seed, suspended in a little globe. Maybe you had one too, or know someone who did? After reading up on mustard seeds and mustard plants, I learned that a mustard seed is small but not the smallest of seeds: and a mustard plant is tall but not the tallest of plants. Even so, it is large enough for the birds to make nests in its shade.

The growth of a seed is hidden. It happens while the sower or scatterer is sleeping, going about his or her daily business. It happens “he does not know how.”

So the seed is small, the plant is big, the growth is a mystery. Familiar themes.

The new thing I heard in today’s story is that the Kingdom of God is *not* the seed itself, but the seed *scattered*, the seed *sown*. A seed only “works” when we let go of it, not when we clutch it or try to keep it. It must go into the ground and die to become something new. It is not meant to be held in our hand, or worn around our neck.

The earth itself causes the growth, “it produces of itself,” the parable says. The kingdom of God is like our lives scattered in the world: our acts of kindness, words of forgiveness, expressions of faith. We scatter them, leave them alone, and go about our business. If we dig them up, looking for signs of growth, constantly checking on their progress, we can ruin their chances to take root.

Like seeds, our lives belong in the soil, in the world; seeds and soil are meant for each other. Both are good: both created by God, designed to work together, to make the kingdom. As one theologian puts it: “For every second that the world has been a world, it has also been the kingdom.” In other words, the world does not change from non-kingdom to kingdom, but from kingdom-in-mystery to **kingdom-made-manifest**.

To what shall we compare the Kingdom of God? It is like someone scattering seed on the ground, trusting that God will bring about the growth. In darkness, in quiet, while we “sleep and rise night and day,” while we go about our daily business. Remembering that it’s a **mystery**. To be believed and lived, rather than understood. We are not the writers of the script, nor the directors of the outcome.

Our lives are full of unknown questions. What will we do when we lose our jobs, when the marriage ends, when our kids go astray ... and most of them do ... at least for a while. How will the hole in our heart be filled, how will we weather the storms of life, the disappointments, the betrayals.

We’re told that God’s love will see us through, that the one who endures will be saved, that the promised kingdom will come both here on earth and in the age to come. How, you ask? I don’t know. It’s a mystery.

But today’s gospel suggests that it has to do with opening our hands and flinging whatever seeds we have been given with abandon, letting them fly *wherever*. Trusting they will land where they can take root, grow as they should, bear fruit in due season, and provide food, shelter, and beauty for all the world.

Then we will see the Kingdom of God in our midst, produced right out of the world that God made.