

**UNIVERSITY UMC OF REDLANDS, CA**  
**“THE HARVEST HAS COME”**

Mark 4:26-34<sup>1</sup>

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2024 – Father’s Day

<sup>26</sup> He also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground <sup>27</sup> and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. <sup>28</sup> The earth produces of itself first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. <sup>29</sup> But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle because the harvest has come.”

<sup>30</sup> He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? <sup>31</sup> It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, <sup>32</sup> 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.”

<sup>33</sup> With many such parables he spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it; <sup>34</sup> he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

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## **Introduction.**

It has not been easy for me to write these last two sermons for this beautiful congregation. In another circumstance, it would be easier because the text is appropriate for reflecting on the nature of God's kingdom. However, due to the upcoming pastoral change, the personal and pastoral touch of this preaching is intensified.

Mark chapter 4 has three different parables about seeds. The first parable is the well-known story about the sower who sows his seed in four different kinds of soil (v 1-9).

While with his disciples a little later on in the day, Jesus tells his disciples that the sower and the soil story is about the mysteries of the Kingdom of God.

But in the two seed stories the lectionary has kept together for us this week, Jesus comes right out and tells everyone listening that they are parables that will help them understand the nature of the Kingdom of God.

The two stories are different, but they both highlight the mysterious nature of the way the Kingdom of God grows. And in each, the Kingdom is a blessing.

The parables we have this morning invite us to continue working on building the Kingdom, even if at times we do not see the fruits of the sowing. They are an invitation not to be anxious or dependent on supposed successes or immediate responses to our efforts. The Kingdom grows, slowly, secretly, and when we least expect it we see its fruits.

Today more than ever we must trust and believe God, because it is not we who make the seed grow, but Him.

Notice how in each story there much human involvement isn't in ushering in the Kingdom of God. Not only is the person utterly anonymous but they don't even "sow" the seed -they throw it on the ground.

## **Someone would scatter seeds on the ground.**

The point of this verse is not the work of the sower, but the nature of the seed that sprouts because of a mysterious force and grows so slowly that we do not see it grow.

It's only when we walk away and come back after a day or a week or a month that we can see its growth – and we're happy about it – and we marvel at it.

The kingdom of God is in that slow but steady growth. We preach, invite, and testify, but the results are most ordinary:

- Some children approach and listen to the children's sermons,
- A teenager shows up for confirmation or a quinceañera.
- A young couple decides to get married in church.
- A group of men/women study a popular Christian book.
- A group of women raises money for a project on the other side of the world.

It doesn't seem to add up too much, but the seed sprouts! God is present! This seems to hide the hard work of the sower, who waters, fertilizes, and pulls weeds between each harvest and harvest. However, even if a reaper did nothing but lay seeds, much of the seed would germinate and sprout to maturity.

The mystery of plant sprouting remains unexamined. However, even with modern techniques we can only, to a certain extent, discern how plants grow – why do they grow, where does their life come from?

We can explain the physical properties that cause the seed to germinate, but life itself remains a mystery—a mystery that can be known only through faith.

Just as "the earth bears fruit of itself" by a process that we know only in part, so God also bears fruit in the kingdom by a process which remains for the most part a mystery.

The point here, however, is not the mystery of the kingdom, but its ability to give us the confidence to depend on it. Just as we can trust that the earth will produce great plants from small seeds, so we can trust that God will bring a great kingdom.

"The earth bears fruit of itself," this phrase refers to the growth of the seed caused by an inner force that the sower did not give it – an intrinsic life power of the plant – a life force put there by God.

It is best to understand this text as a simple parable of an ordinary sower who plants and reaps, but who trusts in God's grace to make the harvest possible.

The Kingdom is not something we can understand or control, but it is something we participate in as its blessings grow.

### **The harvest has come.**

That's the central message of both of these seed parables.

As Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to the mustard seed, he doesn't even need to describe it as mysterious or awe-inspiring. The true nature of the mustard seed-turned-plant does that all on its own.

In Palestine, these shrub trees grow well over fifteen feet tall; they have thick branches and an evergreen (they keep their leaves year-round). As Jesus says, it makes a great home for birds—an image of blessing yet again.

Here, where there is not even a reference to a generic human being involved, Jesus purposefully describes the mustard seed as being "sown" (speirō, the same word from the parable about the sower and the soils).

Juxtaposing the almost careless nature of humanity's involvement in establishing the success of the Kingdom of God, here we get a divine passive: God sows the mustard seed that is the Kingdom of God,

which grows and becomes the home of living things. It is, yet again, a blessing without our merit.

There will be other ways that Jesus helps us understand our responsibilities and involvement in the Kingdom of God, but in these parables, our attention is focused on just one thing: Jesus ushers in the Kingdom of God for our good and in ways beyond our understanding and commitment to him.

The mustard seed is not the smallest seed to ever exist—nor was it even the smallest seed in the region during Jesus’s time.

Describing it as such is part of the genre of the parable as it helps to draw our attention to the mustard seed itself as we try to find the one thing the parable is communicating.

What does appear to be unique about the mustard seed among the other small seeds—and as Jesus points out in his parable—is how big of a plant its small seed produces. “Smallest” to the “greatest” might not be literal, but it is an effective image.

## **Conclusion**

Our lack of knowledge as to how the Kingdom comes into our midst does not stop us from benefiting from it. As the world is transformed by the Spirit of God, we will eventually be caught up in it.

We may not understand how the seed grew in the conditions we put it in, but we know what a crop ready to be harvested looks like.

We are in a transition time!

We have asked our bishop to be able to function with a part-time pastor, and our conference has approved it.

We are also experiencing a decline in our membership, and we are aware that sooner or later we must face the decision to join another church to continue our ministry.

Our denomination has made very important decisions that are impacting our faith community.

So it is important to ask ourselves: How do we express the Kingdom of God among us?

At this point, I want to remember and recognize...

- The Quinceañera of Alix Barron,
- The first lay preacher I invited, Diane Miller, thank you for your willingness and our journey in ministry.
- The other lay preachers supplying our pulpit: David Nesamony, Stephanie and Bob Denham, Dafry Nesamony, and Leslie Kowalski.
- My Worship Team for your excellent work and diligence in preparing every Sunday's worship and celebration, I learned a lot from all of you.
- Do you know who the first member of our church I visited was? Daisy Wakeland, who is now in a place where she can be cared for.

Next (last) preaching I will bring to you more expression of the Kingdom of God among us just to share that our God continues working in us and through us.

I am appreciative that though our contributions to the goodness of God's Kingdom being known and understood are minuscule, God does not stop us from being part of its harvest blessing.

So, what is the Kingdom of God like?

Amen

