

June 17, 2018 • 4th Sunday in Kingdomtide • Father's Day

## A Sense of Mystery and Surprise"

Sermon by the Rev. Patricia Farris

Mark 4:26-34

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

*He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 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."*

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

We're into the season of the church year called "Ordinary Time," or "Kingdomtide" as Methodists call it. Kingdomtide...weeks in which we immerse ourselves in life in the Kingdom of God. We dig a little deeper to discern more of what it is, what it means, how it changes who we think we are and what we think is going on in the world and in the church.

The Scriptures assigned for the Sundays of Kingdomtide offer us stories, stories from the Hebrew Scriptures, from the Epistles, and Jesus' stories from the Gospel of Mark mostly, stories offered in the spirit of all great stories. Stories designed to tweak our imagination, fascinate our minds, touch our hearts, open our eyes to deeper truths and new possibilities. Stories that awaken a sense of mystery and surprise, inviting us, if you will, to be born again in the power of the Spirit.

Now Jesus, as we've come to know, liked to tell what are called "parables." Parables are intriguing, magnificent little stories, really. They might seem simple, at first, in part because, like every master story teller, Jesus uses characters and images that would have been totally familiar to his first students. Today we hear of a farmer or gardener planting seeds. And of the seeds we get a mustard seed, a common metaphor in Palestine for "the smallest thing." OK. Now--how is Jesus using these common things, things we seem to understand, to teach us about the Kingdom of God, something that always remains beyond our ability to comprehend? How do these common, familiar things work in a parable to upon us to new insight and deeper faith?

The word "parable" comes the Greek word: *paraballo*. It literally means to "to toss to," to throw out one thing by the side of another for the sake of comparison. Parables, as one commentator has written, "are stories thrown alongside our lives." It's as if we're going along, living our lives, and Jesus tosses us a new story... "Hey...have you ever thought about ....?"

Parables are stories designed to startle us into taking a second look, shifting the way we see ourselves, see God, see others. Stories tossed into our lives to give a new lens and awaken a sense of mystery and surprise. Sort of like a hummingbird...

In our worship paraments in this season, that is the furnishings on the altar table, pulpit and lectern, the stoles the clergy wear, we see our beautiful beaded hummingbirds. Several years ago, when members of the congregation designed and crafted these gorgeous paraments for our sanctuary, they took as their inspiration for this season the flora and fauna of Southern California—the beautiful leaves and fronds of our plant life, hummingbirds from our lawns and gardens. Hummingbirds can be like *paraballo*s, too, drawing us to take a new look and awakening a sense of mystery and surprise.

In many Central American cultures, the hummingbird is a symbol of the Holy Spirit because it seems to flit effortlessly back and forth between heaven and earth. A messenger, a holy liaison between God and humankind. The other day as I was making a trip out our back door to the laundry room, something startled me and drew me to look up. There was a little hummingbird right above me that seemed to be playing—the best way I can think to describe it—flitting joyfully back and forth above me, landing briefly on the wire to catch its breath, or so it seemed to me, before launching into another verse of its exuberant dance in the air.

The little hummingbird became, for that moment, a parable, a *paraballo*, tossed into my awareness, alongside my ordinary life, transfiguring a load of laundry into an occasion of gratitude and joy. "Lighten up," its happily buzzing wings seemed to sing. "Remember: I am with you always...the kingdom of God is within you."

Let's circle back around to the seemingly familiar characters and images in the parables, the *paraballo*s, we hear this morning from Mark's Gospel, the sower and the seed. I recently read a fascinating commentary on this passage written by Jeanne Choy Tate, an Anglo-American woman who, as a young adult, moved across the country to work as a live-in volunteer in Cameron House in San Francisco's Chinatown, a Presbyterian mission founded in 1874 to rescue Chinese young women immigrants from the then slave trade of forced prostitution and domestic service. This led her to a bi-racial marriage, raising a bi-cultural child, theological studies, and into a vocation as a writer straddling two cultures, comparing and contrasting the insights and world-view of each.



As she unpacks the parable of the sower, first from a Western point of view, she observes that if she were to put herself in the story, she'd want to be in an active role, assisting in building the Kingdom of God as either the sower, tossing the seed out across the field that it might grow, or, perhaps, the seed, that compact package of energy that bursts forth in new life, sometimes in ways as astonishing and impactful as that tiny mustard seed.

As she re-examines the parable, the parabollo, from an Eastern point of view, she gains a new insight. Something changes in her imagination when she imagines herself not as the sower or the seed, but instead as the soil, the yin to the yang. She writes: "If the Kingdom of God is like a seed, it is also like the soil that embraces and blankets the seed, protecting it from the elements through fallow times until its time for fruition has come."

She observes that in these crazy times in which we live, times of constant tension and turmoil on the political scene, times of change and uncertainty on so many levels, that in these times of watching and waiting, perhaps our role in the Kingdom is to become the soil, those who wait in hope, staying steady, preparing for and anticipating a new fullness of life to come.

I wondered if that image doesn't speak to us, too, in this season in the life of our congregation. We have bidden farewell to Pastor Robert and will for some time be grieving his departure and reflecting on all the ways his ministry among us has so deeply helped form who we have become as individuals, as families, as a congregation. We are in something of an in-between time, now, as we await a new configuration in our ministerial team. We cannot yet see what lies ahead, all that will come in the next season of our life together, what new creativity, visions, and dreams will unfold. We do not know what will spring up from the soil of this beloved community. As we read in 1 John 3: "beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be."

These sorts of in-between times in our lives, are not always easy or comfortable for us, are they? We tend to prefer the joyous celebration times, the sowing and planting, the abundant harvest.

The poet John O'Donohue expresses our unease in his beautiful poem entitled: "For the Interim Time:"

"You are in this time of the interim  
Where everything seems withheld.  
The path you took to get here has washed out;  
The way forward is still concealed from you.

What is being transfigured here in your mind,  
And it is difficult and slow to become new.  
The more faithfully you can endure here,  
The more refined your heart will become  
For your arrival in the new dawn."

For this interim time, Jesus tosses a new story alongside our lives. The Kingdom of God is like the soil in which, even now, new life is germinating. It is like the same humus, or earth, out of which our Creator God created the first human earthling, Adam, and all the fruit trees and other flowering plants of the garden. Here, in the rich and fertile soil that is the very life of this faithful, missional, prayerful, sinning, loving, welcoming congregation, here, in ways we cannot yet see or touch or know, new life is finding root and preparing to burst forth.

Jesus' parable literally grounds us in the assurance that these waiting times are sacred. The Word of God invites us now to wait, to trust, to dream, to pray, and to pay attention. "Lo, I am with you always," Christ promised.

So each time a tiny, magnificent, luminous hummingbird catches your eye, smile. Pause for a moment, and say: "thank you, God." Thank you for abiding with us. Thank you for tossing little moments of remembrance and assurance and delight into our day. Thank you for waking up our sense of mystery and surprise, "unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see."

Notes:

Nibs Stroupe in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

Jeanne Choy Tate. "Reflections on the Lectionary." *The Christian Century*, May 23, 2018.

John O'Donohue. "For the Interim Time." In *To Bless the Space Between Us*, Doubleday, 2008.

Natalie Sleeth. "Hymn of Promise." *The United Methodist Hymnal #707*.

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