

Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 13, 2021
“Kingdom Growth” (Mark 4:26-34)

Growth is a part of our daily lives. We watch our children and grandchildren grow. We look in the mirror, watching ourselves grow older. We try to grow our businesses and retirement accounts. And many of us spend time trying to get plants to grow.

I’ve been busy with that this spring. I constructed a bed in my side yard several years ago, but have not really had any luck with growing anything. The perennials I set out all died, so I decided to try again. I bought about 30 new plants – different varieties – and carefully placed them in the ground. I put potting soil around them before covering the roots and watered them very generously. I heard Amelia’s voice in my head telling me to really pour the water to them.

I watered them every day for the first week, then moved to every other day for the next few weeks. I also fertilized them around week three. As a result, I have a bed of healthy plants that I hope we can enjoy for years to come.

Yes, we all enjoy watching things grow – whether it’s the grass in our yard, the shrubs and flowers in our beds, our vegetable gardens, or a field of grain. We may not understand biologically how growth takes place, but we do know that under the right conditions when a seed, root or sprout is placed in the ground, it begins to grow and mature.

For many centuries, people have been agricultural in nature, using things produced from the earth: for food, for medicinal purposes, for building materials, and so on. The Hebrew people, too, were very familiar with the idea of growth and its importance in their lives. This became a theme in many of their writings. Our scripture readings this morning are evidence of this.

We begin with a prophesy of hope recorded in the book of Ezekiel: *Thus says the Lord God: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar: I will set it out. I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit.* This message of hope was a message the people of Judah needed to hear. They had watched as the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians and was completely wiped out. But they had not learned from that experience.

So, because of Judah’s continued wickedness and sinfulness, because of her inability to trust in God completely, she suffered the same fate and fell to the powers of the great Babylonian empire. The Babylonians came in like a roaring lion, sweeping through the southern kingdom, taking the Hebrews captive. Many were snatched from their homes, transported to places all throughout the vast empire, and forced to live as exiles. Scattered and separated, they were no longer a unified people, but hostages in a strange land. And worst of all, they were removed from the one thing that was at the heart and center of their lives – the temple in Jerusalem, the place that housed their God. Not only did they feel lost, alone, abandoned, and uncertain of their future, but they were separated from their God.

It is during this time of exile that the prophet Ezekiel appears. He tells them why there are where they are. If you’ll remember from last week’s Old Testament text, the question God asked the

first man and woman after they had eaten from the forbidden fruit was *Where are you?* God wanted them to consider where they were spiritually – how they arrived at the place, where they were hiding from God. Here Ezekiel tells the people why they are where they are. They are in exile because they have placed their hope in foreign alliances, in themselves, in anything but God. *And it's not over, Ezekiel prophesies. You're going to be here for a while, so settle in and make the best of your situation. And while you're here, repent! God is not in the temple only, but is with you here in exile. Talk with him, learn to trust in him, and one day he will lead you back home.*

Like the other OT prophets, Ezekiel prophesies doom and destruction to God's people. But then – as always – comes a word of hope, a word of promise. God promises that a tender twig will be planted. That twig will be the Messiah whose kingdom will grow and become a shelter for all who come to him.

We know that Ezekiel's prophesy was fulfilled. At the coming of Jesus Christ, God's kingdom was ushered in. And, here again, we see the idea of growth. From this one twig would grow a noble cedar that would bear fruit and provide a home for all kinds of birds.

The people of Israel did eventually return home – just as Ezekiel prophesied – but for more than 500 years they looked and longed for the day when the Kingdom of God would be among them. But what would it look like? How would they recognize it? And what about this promised messiah, this twig that God would plant? Would he come as a great military / political leader who would oust Israel's enemies? Would he establish a great earthly empire where he would reign supreme? This seemed to be the prevailing thought of the day, but as we all know, this was not part of God's divine plan. God's messiah would come to earth in the most common of ways. From a humble birth, he would grow into manhood. He would associate with sinners – thieves, tax collectors, and harlots. He would be condemned as a rebel-rouser and suffer a violent death on a Roman cross.

So, exactly what kind of kingdom could be established by this simple carpenter's son turned preacher? In today's gospel reading from Mark, Jesus himself gives us an idea of what the Kingdom of God is all about. Speaking in parables and using agricultural language, he says, *The Kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, 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.*

My grandmother was the ultimate gardener. I fondly remember from when I was a kid how excited she got in the spring when it was time for planting. She would secure the seeds – many of which had been saved from the previous year – consult the Farmer's Almanac, and when she thought the time was right, would drop the seeds into the long fertilized rows my grandpa, dad or uncle had prepared. She loved to see the newly form plants break the surface of the soil, and patiently watched them grow, anticipating a big summer of canning. If some of the seeds wouldn't germinate, she would replant and hope for better results. She also faithfully hoed the garden to prevent the weeds from choking out the vegetable plants.

It was a lot of hard work, still it brought her lots of joy. But she knew – as does anyone who grows – that even though she planted the seed, and tended to the maturing plants, that the sprouting and growth of the seeds depended solely on God and would happen in God’s good time.

So it is with the Kingdom of God. It grows entirely of itself. The planter plants the seed and then sleeps. All the while, the seed grows. The conditions for growth may be improved by the farmer, but growth and maturity remain within the confines of the seed. That seed – that twig – planted in the Kingdom of God is Jesus Christ. When we believe in him, accept him as our Savior and the model for how we live our lives, that seed of faith sown in us at our baptism is nurtured and bursts to life within us.

God’s kingdom, then, is not really a place – not some kind of heavenly magic kingdom. However, it can sometimes be seen. Luther tells us that what makes God’s kingdom real are the actions of those who live godly lives. God’s kingdom is the power of God at work in and through God’s people – through people like you and me. We carry it with us wherever we go and in whatever we do. This kingdom is God dwelling in our hearts and lives, helping us to align our wills to his in making the world a better place – the world as God desires it to be.

Of course, there are those times in our lives when we feel like we are in exile: times of great sorrow, times we feel lonely and think no one cares, times when we feel that even God has turned the divine back, times when the kingdom of God seems stagnant and not growing. Like the people of Israel in exile, we ask, *Where is God when I need him?* But God did not abandon the children of Israel, and God will not abandon us. Rather God has sown within us the seed that springs forth life and makes us a new creation as the Apostle Paul tells us in the second lesson.

Each and every day, we are growing in the Kingdom of God, carefully tended by God’s loving hand. We can’t always see this growth. We may even think that no growth is taking place; but we discover it when we need it most. In this kingdom, we find peace in our unrest, comfort in our distress, contentment in our anxiety, and strength to serve where God calls us to serve. This is something we cannot do for ourselves – just like we can’t make a seed sprout and come to life. It happens only by the grace and will of God.

It is God who gives you and me the faith we need to believe in Christ, so that we can grow in spiritual maturity until the day of that great harvest when the Kingdom of God is fully realized. And this *will* come to pass. What was prophesied by Ezekiel came to pass: the people of God went back home. God promised a messiah, which also came to pass. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are redeemed. We are made new. And Christ’s promise to be with us always – in times of brokenness, trouble and hardships – will also come to pass. Therefore, as we wait for the final coming of the kingdom, let us continue to grow and mature in faith and love, knowing that we are faithfully tended by God.