

Pentecost 4, June 16, 2024 (Mark 4:26-34; Ezek 17:22-24; Ps 92:1-4, 12:15; 2 Cor 5:6-17)

The first words Jesus speaks in Mark's gospel are these: **The time is fulfilled! The kingdom of God is at hand! Repent and believe the good news!** Or, in another translation: **Now is the time! Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!** -- Our theme today is *the kingdom of God*.

Bear with me a moment while I talk about what life was like when I served in Green Bay for ten years. Since Calvary Lutheran was just half a mile from Lambeau Field, we had to take the Packers' schedule into consideration when planning church activities.

A *huge* number of Americans—not all from Wisconsin!—plan their vacations and game-day schedules around Packer games, and the economy of Green Bay booms—especially during a winning season.

Even if you're not a fan, there's a good chance your life in Green Bay will be impacted on home game days. The *kingdom* of the Packers is a reality in Wisconsin. You have to live through it to understand it.

How can you explain this phenomenon to someone who's never experienced it? When I was in my second year of seminary in South Carolina in 1997, I was being interviewed for a possible internship in the Fox Valley. Pastor Steve told me, "If you come to Combined Locks, you'll have to root for the Packers." In complete ignorance, I asked, "What are the Packers?"

I think the kingdom of God is as hard for many to understand as the world of football was for me. Where is it? What does it look like? feel like? How does it change things? And, what does it matter?

Jesus told a lot of parables, mostly about the kingdom of God. It's not a *place*. It was a way to talk about God's presence in the world, and how our own relationship with God invites us to live more in his presence than in the world around us.

The kingdom of God is upside-down, inside-out, topsy-turvy nonsense and foolishness to those who don't know God. It's where Jesus came to seek out the last, the least, the little, the lonely, the loser, and the lost.

It's where God does ungodly things like being born in a stable; opening himself up to mocking and ridicule and betrayal by his friends. It's where God does the most ungodly thing of all: God dies.

God does all this to make a point: He loves us, each and every one of us—and everyone else—fully and freely, body, mind, and spirit.

The mystery of the kingdom of God is that you can't really experience it until you begin to experience it. Even if you have a miraculous conversion experience, like some of our born-again sisters and brothers, you have to *grow into* recognizing and living into the kingdom of God.

It's sort of like learning a foreign language by immersion in a foreign country and culture. (Like my internship experience with the Packers.)

In the Hebrew scriptures, what we call the *Old Testament*, the Israelites believed God would "redeem" them from the shame in which they were held by the surrounding nations.

God would bring them back from Exile in Babylon—where they were when Ezekiel was writing—and restore their former power and glory in Jerusalem.

And that transformation from captive to free would be dramatic and impressive! God himself would take a shoot from the very top of a cedar tree—which was tall, majestic, and noble—and then plant it on high and lofty Mount Zion. —The *shoot* would be the Jewish exiles, returned to their own land.

There that shoot would bear fruit, and birds of every kind—that is, people from all nations—would come and find shelter under it. And everyone in the world would recognize and honor the power of the Lord!

What a grand image that is! You can imagine what people expected, then, when Jesus said, **What shall we say the kingdom of God is like? What parable shall we use to describe it?**

I picture a classroom—like a Confirmation class—where every hand is raised: *I know, I know! The kingdom of God is like the mighty cedars Ezekiel wrote about!* You can just hear the silence when Jesus continues: **The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed.**

A weed? God's kingdom—God's glorious rule—is like a common, ordinary bush that grows everywhere around Palestine?

In his life and in his parables, Jesus invites us to step out of a world where everything is planned and logical, and to enter the kingdom of God, filled with mysteries and surprises, where we're welcomed and cherished by a sovereign God we can't begin to understand.

The words of St. Paul may help: **"We are always confident, even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight. . . . So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"**

God has planted the seed—the Word, the kingdom—in the world and in our hearts. As we grow in faith, the kingdom grows in and around us.

As we become a new creation in Christ, we can encompass not only the birds of the air, but also all the people in God's creation who are last, least, little, lonely, losers, or lost. The kingdom of God is in all, for all.

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Think about that when we pray together in a few moments, “Thy kingdom come”!

Think about it next time you sit down to watch the Packers play and enjoy a good Wisconsin brat with mustard—grown from the seed of a Palestinian weed.

And look for God in the small things, in the unlikely places, like your own life, your own heart.

Thanks be to God!