

**Find God's Fields and Shrubs**  
**Sermon by Rev. Dr. Anne Miner-Pearson**  
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“Jesus said, ‘The kingdom of God is as if....’”. I wonder what Mark’s small community in Rome thought about his words and image of Jesus. Their world could not be more upside-down. Three decades ago, Jerusalem, the holy city of their Jewish roots, had been razed to the ground, massive stone by massive stone. At the same time, soldiers of the Roman Empire massacred the entire priestly clan. Instead of lambs and goats, the blood of humans covered the temple altar and courts. Now, three decades later, Mark repeats Jesus’ words and images to Christus followers living in their own current upside-down world. In July, 64 CE, a massive fire swept through their own city, Rome. No one knows how the fire started, but Emperor Nero is looking for scapegoats. For now, he’s decided a small Jewish sect will solve the problem of the ruling class calling for his blood. He can punish those followers of Jesus who neither the Jews or the Roman Empire know what to do with.

At such a time and in such a place, Mark is looking for ears, eyes and hearts open to the good news of Jesus. As a member of this community, Mark knows the fear of living with uncertainty. Death is not an abstract. A knock at the door could be a Roman centurion looking for Christ followers. Those in the Jewish ghetto hear the news of violence, live as divided neighbors and families, sift for truth in contradicting reports. Mark knows it all. He lives in Rome. And also Mark knows Jesus, maybe even during Jesus’ life or maybe through Peter and Paul. But, for sure, Mark knows Jesus. Mark’s own life has been turned upside-down, from the inside out, by Jesus.

And Mark wants to tell his heart’s story of Jesus to his small, frightened community. Christ-followers see what’s going on in their political world and how labels even lead to death. Holding on, believing in Jesus, is more than hard: it’s dangerous. Things don’t look very hopeful. Fear about the future is real. Jesus’ promises of new life can seem empty or wishful when times are dark and uncertain.

Mark doesn’t waste effort on flowery platitudes. There’s pain out there on the streets and behind doors. More questions than answers. Into such a time and place, Mark proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ. Mark gathers Jesus’ stories and parables because Jesus meant those words and images to be for all times and places. Mark’s good news is that Jesus is present as his words and parables breathe hope into a 1st century community.

“Jesus 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..... 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...”

“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?” With what can we describe God working endlessly and eternally in this amazing creation and in the lives we each have been given? How is the energy of love and new life present, especially when there’s change, uncertainty and pain? Mark has good news for that question embedded deeply in the human DNA. Where do we look? What are the clues? Where do we find hope to sustain us and quiet our imagined and real fears?

Mark has answers as do all the gospel writers. Mark is not merely re-telling stories and parables. The energy and presence of hope embodied in Jesus Christ is present in the words and images in all times and places. That’s because Jesus is the Christ. That’s why the gospels embrace both the historical Jesus who lived and died and the eternal Christ who was in the beginning and holds all things together.

And that’s good news, indeed, and sends us, Christ-followers in the summer of 2021, looking for the kingdom of God - for seeds scattered and growing in the dark of the soil, sprouting roots we can’t see yet, developing a harvest not as visible and ready as we’d like. That’s why we draw on hope. It is the unknown and uncertainty that grows and matures hope. That’s when hope matters and counts - 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. We don’t know how and where God’s transforming Spirit is present. That’s when Jesus calls on our faith, belief despite the world telling us that hate, violence, division and injustice are the only things growing out there.

But no, Jesus says. The kingdom of God is growing out there. Like the mysterious ways of nature, the amazing ways of love, the surprising ways of community, something else is happening. God, is present. We know not how for “how” is a matter of the mind. Yet, the kingdom of God is a matter of the heart, when the heart is connected to the mind and loving actions. The kingdom of God is small shifts occurring almost (or maybe totally) unnoticed at any one time. The kingdom of God is energy not fueled by urgency, but bubbling up from a living stream. The kingdom of God is time wisely spent living in the tension between attention and patience, between people and tasks, between pain and hope.

That’s what Jesus tells us in Mark’s gospel and then calls us to follow him. Jesus invites us to find the fields and the shrubs in our own time and lives. Today, I want to tell you of 4 fields or shrubs where I find the energy of love and new life present.

First, congressional members are quietly working across the aisle and coaxing the seeds of important bills - dealing with science funding, new energy labs and infrastructure. Closer to home, in North Minneapolis, there are white, Black and Hmong neighbors hoeing a field of re-opened and new businesses, a remodeled Capri theatre and a renewed commitment to live there. In the wider world, I can remember how a small mustard seed grew into a big enough peace shrub to hold both Spain and the

Basque region, Northern Ireland and Britain, India and Pakistan. Not a perfectly-manicured shrub, but one with branches of restraint and even forgiveness.

Finally, I see the energy of God's love and new life in God's field called Trinity. And oh, the seeds many of you have sown in this field over the last year. In the midst of change, uncertainty and challenge, you have tended God's mysterious presence of love and new life. You have grown in your commitment to our common ministry, in all its varied forms. Your roots of caring of those in our pews and those beyond these walls have deepened. You have paid attention to those who struggled to worship on zoom. You have looked for the names of people who are seeking a welcoming branch on our shrub. You have noticed openings in our community and in hearts where justice might break through. You have watered tiny sprouts of awareness with reading, conversation and actions. You have lovingly sorted through covid data to find safe ways to connect - creative Sunday mornings with the kids and youth laughing and praying on zoom, an in-person Easter Vigil that begs to be repeated, and now, today, Trinity's re-entry seed has cracked open, grown roots and voila, here's the first sprout! And personally, I am receiving the rich harvest of your love as I read and savor birthday cards and share my life with you into my 80th year. Thanks be to God. Amen.