

Sermon: The One Who Makes Things Happen

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Ezekiel 17:22-24; Mark 4:26-34**

From the very beginning, God has made things happen. In Genesis, God spoke, and a world came into being. In Exodus, God delivered a people up out of slavery. In the Gospels, God spoke in parables to those who were able to hear it. And in Ezekiel, God spoke in visions. Today, the parable and the vision come together.

One thing that current events continue to teach us is that we cannot cherry-pick Scripture to make a point or to validate a position without bringing in the full context of the passage. We do so at our own peril. Without going into details, in recent days, we've heard people use and mis-use Scripture for their own ends, only to be countered by alternative readings of the same passages, neither of which advances the discussion or makes a persuasive argument either way. You only muddy the waters.

One of our favorite characters in William Goldman's book *The Princess Bride* once said, 'You keep using that word; I don't think it means what you think it means.'

We all want to be more like Jesus. If you mean to speak in parables, say so and we'll hear it that way, but if you mean to speak in absolute terms, you better be clear and have your argument straight before you say anything, which is one reason I put all of my sermons down on paper: I don't trust my brain to cover everything I want to say *and* in the order in which I mean to say it. The last thing I need is to wake up tonight thinking, 'Dang! I forgot to mention how ancient Jewish oral teachings became the written Torah!'

Speaking of the written Torah, did you hear how alike are the mighty cedar tree and the greatest of all shrubs? There are two things we can learn from this: that Jesus knew his Scripture and assumed that those who heard his words might know it too, and that context is everything.

Chapter 17 in Ezekiel opens with a great eagle who, 'with great wings and long pinions, rich in plumage of many colors, came to the Lebanon. He took the top of the cedar, and broke off its topmost shoot.' He carried it to a land of trade and set it in a city

of merchants. By the time we get to verse 22 in our reading today, it is now God who takes a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar and plants it on the mountain height of Israel, on Mount Zion. From one actual cedar comes another, noble and symbolic cedar.

Notice that under it, every kind of bird will live and nest in its shade, which is exactly what Jesus says about the birds in the mustard shrub. But the context is different.

In the history of the ancient Near East, cedar trees also played an important economic role. Shipbuilders used them for boats and architects used them in temples and palaces. The original Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem was built with this wood. In literature, Gilgamesh did battle against an ogre in a cedar forest.

If you look at a topographical map of Lebanon, first you might notice that the country isn't very big, maybe fifty miles across at its widest. You'll also see that a large mountain range runs right through the middle of it. On one side of the mountains is the Mediterranean Sea, and on the other, the mountains drop down into a desert.

Along the mountain range grew the mighty cedars of Lebanon, which are mentioned in Psalm 92, where:

The righteous flourish like the palm tree,
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon (Psalm 92:12).

We're talking about big, gnarly trees, magnificent to behold and long-lived if they were lucky enough to escape the woodsman's axe. Unfortunately, they are mostly gone now from the Lebanon Mountains, perhaps fulfilling Ezekiel's vision that God will bring the high tree low and exalt the low tree. But the lone cedar of Israel will exceed them all.

This might be the metaphorical background that Jesus had in mind when he told the parable of the mustard seed, the smallest known seed in the world at that time, and to which Jesus said we can compare *the kingdom of God*.

Can Jesus be serious here? The most apologetic of Christian theologians often exaggerate the size of the mustard shrub, some saying it will grow to as high as 12 feet and can become very tree-like in stature. Nonetheless, in reality, it's a scrubby little bush. Most horticulturists will say that all forms of mustard plants are invasive. Not only that, they're annuals which need to be replanted from year to year. Does Jesus really want us to compare a scrubby, invasive bush that won't last through the winter to *the kingdom of God*? There must be something more to it than that.

In the Greek, *parable* meant literally to ‘throw alongside,’ that is, to talk about one thing in terms of another, to make a figurative comparison. Jesus and the Gospel writers use parables to present images that are impenetrable for those without ears to hear, specifically for outsiders such as the local Roman soldiers or for those in the community who might not understand them, the Pharisees and scribes, for example.

Earlier in chapter 4, Jesus said to his disciples when they were alone, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that ‘they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand’” (Mark 4:11-12).

This kingdom is meant to be a mystery kept in secret until it can grow and create shade for all the birds of the air, who have no other place to make a nest.

Did Jesus intend for only the insiders to understand him? Were the insiders the only ones for whom salvation was available? Or is this Mark’s non-inclusive way to separate one group from another, with one lost and the other saved?

In 1946, after a five-year hiatus, the Marx Brothers made a film called *A Night in Casablanca*, and in it, they manage to get people to laugh at Nazis, who are made to look ridiculous ‘at a time when the world was crawling with Nazis hoping to remain undetected,’ as *Tablet* magazine recently put it.¹ According to legend, ‘Warner Bros. threatened to sue the Marx Brothers over the use of *Casablanca* in the title, to which Groucho responded that they would file a countersuit—since, after all, the three of them had been brothers long before the Warner brothers came around.’ Groucho showed how rigid and inflexible the world is and was.

Jesus says that, in the eyes of the world, the mustard bush provides only a modest refuge. He says the kingdom is not a towering empire, but an unpretentious faith that grows we don’t know how. One needs faith to access and then dwell in God’s kingdom; it is a faith which needs nurturing and renewal, and which is open to the future. And whatever we hope the kingdom will be, it might come as a surprise to those who think they know what it ought to be.

Amen.



¹ <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/264469/what-to-watch-this-weekend-a-night-in-casablanca>, accessed 16 June 2018.