

Sermon: High & Low; Small & Large

New North Church, Hingham

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

From the beginning, God has made things happen. In Genesis, God spoke, and a world came into being. In Exodus, when Moses asked, “Who shall I say sent me?” the LORD replied, “Tell them I AM sent you,” literally, “Tell them the one who makes things happen sent you.” Then God delivered the Israelites up out of slavery.

In Ezekiel, God took charge and promised to plant something unique and durable. In the Gospels, God spoke in parables to those with ears to hear.

The Cedars of Lebanon are not a myth. The Bible mentions them 103 times. They were and remain the national symbol of Lebanon.

If you look at a topographical map of Lebanon, you can see that the country isn't very big. It borders Israel to the south with Syria to the east and north. A large mountain range runs right through the middle of the country. 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.

Hundreds of years of deforestation and exploitation left the forest in ruins, badly affecting the environment. By 1550, the forest was down to 28 trees. Twenty-five years later, there were 24 trees. In 1655, there were 23, then 20 in 1660. From the nineteenth century on, conservation efforts have saved the cedars from extinction.

Today, Lebanon is making a big effort to rebuild the forests both naturally and through new plantings in several nature preserves including one 25-acre World Heritage Site called the Forest of the Cedars of God. But we almost lost them.¹

In the same way, we almost lost our American Bison, perhaps the most iconic North American mammal and the official mammal of the United States. The bison is the heaviest, the longest, and the second tallest North American land animal after the moose.

Depending on how you look at it, there are three subspecies: northern plains (*B. b. montanae*), southern plains (*B. b. bison*), and wood bison (*B. b. athabascae*). The Latin name for the southern plains subspecies is *Bison bison bison*.

With a population in excess of 60 million in the late 18th century, the species was down to just 541 animals by 1889. In an effort to sabotage the central food resource of some American Indian nations during the later portions of the American Indian Wars, professional hunters and the United States government hunted the animal to near-extinction by 1890.

In 1990, 56 tribes in 19 states formed the Inter-Tribal Bison Council. These tribes represent a collective herd of more than 15,000 bison and focus on reestablishing herds on tribal lands in order to promote culture, revitalize spiritual solidarity, and restore the ecosystem. Today, 31,000 wild bison roam the American West, with 360,000 total.²

The point is that throughout history, we have undermined God's creation for our own ends. Sometimes, it's not until we're on the brink of disaster that we manage to come to our senses and pull back. As a species, we are extremely capable of causing great harm through our politics, commerce, and bad decisions, but when we come to our senses in common cause, we have the compassion and ability to fix big problems too.

In the history of the ancient Near East, cedar trees played an important economic role. Shipbuilders used them for boats and architects used them to build temples and palaces, such as the Temple of Solomon.

The most apologetic and optimistic of Christian theologians often exaggerate the size of the mustard plant, some saying it can grow to as high as 12 feet and become very tree-like in stature, but in reality, it's a scrubby little bush.

So why compare the mighty cedar tree with the greatest of all shrubs?

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

Can he be serious? Most horticulturists will tell you that all forms of mustard plants are invasive. They're also 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.

Chapter 17 in Ezekiel opens with an 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 taking a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar and planting it on the mountain height of Israel. From one actual cedar sprig comes a noble and symbolic cedar tree.

And 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.

In Ezekiel, it’s interesting that all the other ‘trees of the field’ will know that it was God who planted this one cedar on Mount Zion. Why would that be important to the story? Maybe to show all the surrounding cultures that what God planted is durable, robust, and, in some cases, huge – today, four trees in the Forest of the Cedars of God have trunks ranging in diameter from 39 to 46 feet thick.

Jesus used parables to talk about one thing in terms of another, to make a figurative comparison. 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). Those on the outside included the local Roman soldiers, the Pharisees, and the scribes; they don’t need to know.

You have to be open to the message in order to hear it, but you want to avoid getting it wrong too. In verse 24, just before he told these parables, Jesus said, “Pay attention to what you hear,” or more accurately, “Be *careful how* you hear.”

Then he told the parable which we can call ‘the parable of the automatically growing seed.’ This parable appears nowhere else in the Gospels. Someone scattered seed on the ground; Jesus defined the seed as ‘the word’ in verse 14. In telling this story, Jesus means that someone – us, presumably – must *sow* the seed but it is God who *makes* it grow, on its own, we know not how, but God makes it happen.

In the second parable, the kingdom of God is meant to grow and create shade for all the birds of the air, who have no other place to make a nest. That sounds like a metaphor of the early church. There are all kinds of birds, and they all need a place to go.

Here's a question: why did Jesus not use cedars as his metaphor, as Ezekiel did? Would that have been too obvious? Who would pay attention to a parable about a mustard bush? Not the Romans, and maybe not the scribes and Pharisees, either.

In the last verse today, Mark noted that Jesus 'explained everything in private to his disciples' but if we keep reading, we never see that explanation. That suggests to me that we don't need to know what Jesus told them privately; it doesn't matter. We're meant to work out their meaning for ourselves.

Jesus said that in the eyes of the world, the mustard bush provides only a modest refuge – whether the shrub is twelve feet tall or a scrubby bush, it ain't no cedar tree.

He meant that the kingdom should be seen by others not as a towering empire, but as an unpretentious faith that grows in secret on the ground. It is a faith which needs nurturing and renewal and is open to the future. But like the cedar tree planted by God, there's plenty of room for everyone under the branches of this shrub of a bush, whatever we hope the kingdom will be.

If we think of these parables in terms of our own ministries, what more can the sower do other than cast the seed and then go to sleep? Well, we can water it, fertilize it, weed it, help it along. That will give us a healthy, plentiful crop, but it is still God who will make it grow. The process doesn't stop either. Sowers will continue to scatter the word on the ground. The kingdom will continue to grow.

These parables are a message of hope that we are all in God's hands and that God continues to make things happen.

Amen.

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¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cedars_of_God, accessed 9 June 2021.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_bison, accessed 11 June 2021.