

It was, to be honest, a time of crisis. Take a few moments with me and try to put yourself in their shoes. An entire generation was disappearing before their eyes—and not just any generation, but the *first* generation, the hands-on generation, the *greatest* generation, if you will, those who had seen Jesus with their eyes and touched him with their hands, those who had comprised the inner circle and heard him with their own ears, those who had been with him in Galilee and traveled the long road to Jerusalem, those who had stood back and observed the cross from afar, experienced the exhilaration of the resurrection and then innocently inquired whether he was ready to set up his kingdom. The weak and despicable, and, yes, nasty Nero had unleashed a reign of terror upon them as convenient scapegoats to cover up for his own ineptitude, at best, and his evil, at worst. Peter and possibly Paul as well would be gathered up in his net and put to death. Would the Jesus movement simply vanish from the earth? Would the remembrances of Jesus that they had been passing to one another by word of mouth survive? Was it time to give up and assume they had been following a pipe dream? Or was it time to agree together that they should dig in for the long haul and make provisions for those who would come after them?

Enter Mark and then Matthew, Luke and eventually John and their writings, which we collectively refer to as the Gospels. Possibly composed anonymously and assigned over time their respected names, the Gospels, the first four books of the Second Testament, sought to preserve the core of the Christian faith. They sought to preserve the life and meaning of Jesus. As we attest every Sunday morning when we stand for the Gospel reading, the Gospels are the most critical part of our scriptures. Written over a period of about thirty years, they have different authors and were written in varying situations for varying audiences and needs. Although we tend to blur their distinctions and weave them into one continuous story, they differ in style, emphasis, and narrative/teaching content. They each seek to bear witness to Jesus' earthly ministry in terms relevant to the life situation of the churches to which they are addressed; and together, they have provided the church over these two millennia with the central content and measure of its faith. We are going to spend several weeks this summer giving consideration to the nature of each Gospel witness and the contribution it makes both to our understanding of the life and faith of Jesus and the life and faith to which we are called as well.

Appropriately, we begin at the beginning. Although it is in second place in Christian scriptures, Mark was the first of the four Gospels to be written. It was a primary source used later by the writers of both Matthew and Luke. The shortest of the Gospels and seemingly missing its conclusion, it is written in something on the order of street language, *Koine* or common Greek. It depicts Jesus in almost constant motion. Long, run-on sentences with lots of verbs and adverbs depict one action following another in rapid succession. Some forty-two times in its sixteen short chapters, Mark indicates something took place "immediately" or "all of a sudden." We should not miss that it was most likely written during Nero's persecution in a time of deep stress and grief. Not only are many in the greatest generation dying of natural causes. They are also dying for their faith. Haunting questions loom in the background: From outside come the probing questions of those who want to believe but cannot. "How," they ask, "could he have been among us without our recognizing him? If he is who you say he is, wouldn't it have been obvious?" And from those outside who ridiculed the Christian witness because of Jesus' death on the cross and from those inside who were so deeply pained by his death: "How could he be who you say he is and yet have died such an ignominious death?" And from those inside, asking in terms not unfamiliar to Christians of any age: "What does our present suffering mean? Does it undercut everything we have ever believed or for which we have hoped?"

In response, Mark begins with the passion story. Often called "a passion story with an extended introduction," Mark treats the story of Jesus' death as anything but an embarrassment. It was the first part of the Gospel to be composed and it remains front and center throughout. Mark depicts Jesus foretelling his death three times and devotes half of his Gospel to the journey to Jerusalem, Jesus' death and (briefly) his resurrection. No accident, no minor footnote, it was the story that obviously formed the core of early Christian belief and around which the church gathered. John Shelby Spong suggests Mark composed it for liturgical reasons as the "Christian Passover"—the story Christians shared as they gathered around the table on Passover night just as their Jewish relatives gathered at table to share the story of the Exodus [*Liberating the Gospels*, 73]. Furthermore, rather than an embarrassment, rather than evidence that it was all just a farce after all, the Christian community's own suffering in the present was consistent with the teaching of one who had instructed them that following him would mean that they, too, would have to take up a cross (8:34).

Throughout, Mark stresses the character of the Kingdom of God, which was front and center in Jesus'

teaching. The reign of God, Jesus tells his followers, will come in its own time and way. Seemingly recalling the prophecies of Ezekiel and Daniel, he draws, it seems, a conscious distinction. In keeping with his love for surprising twists and turns in his parables to catch his hearers up short, Jesus abandons the mighty, majestic cedars of Lebanon to which his predecessors pointed as worthy symbols of God's reign and turned instead to a common, ordinary mustard plant. We have interpreted his words as pointing to the quiet, inner working of God in the midst of human history. And to those early Christians, still seemingly so small and insignificant and buffeted on every side by powerful religious and secular forces, it must have come as hopeful reassurance. And to us as well, frustrated at times with the abuse and misuse of power we see in the world around us, it is reassurance that mere power and wealth and size are not the true measure of God's blessing. It is a reminder, too, of the course we must follow in our mission, for the church is never more impaired and the kingdom never more endangered than when the church seeks to grab for itself the accouterments of status and power so valued by the world.

We must be careful though that we do not sentimentalize Jesus' words. In saying that wealth and power and status are not sure signs of the coming of God's reign, we are not saying that God's Kingdom and thus Christ's church are blessed to retreat to a far corner somewhere. William Willimon, former Dean of Chapel at Duke and currently serving as a Methodist bishop in Alabama, characteristically speaks to the point in sardonic terms. For mainline churches watching their slide into minority status and for those of us who are just small in numbers, the message of God's reign arriving in a small bush rather than a powerful tree must be about something more than numbers. Self-righteously sniffing that "We never wanted to be a tree anyway" doesn't quite get the point [*Christian Century*, May 15-22, 1991].

True, the mustard seed is small, although it is not as Mark observes "the smallest of all seeds;" and true, the mustard plant is a bush reaching maybe 10 feet in height. It isn't a tree. But there is another characteristic of the mustard plant of which Jesus' hearers, unlike us, would have certainly been aware. Although it was used as a spice and for some medicinal purposes, the mustard plant was not something one planted in a garden, for it had a terrible reputation of being incredibly invasive. It could take over an entire field in no time. Substitute the word dandelion, crabgrass, or better yet, Kudzu and you get a feel for the shock value of what Jesus is saying. More than size, Jesus may be likening the Kingdom of God to a pesky little plant that had a way of working quietly underground as it widened its reach farther and farther. To those with power, this might not be good news. It might even be perceived as dangerous. But to those who were hurting, to those for whom the status quo spoke of scarcity and fear and limited justice, it spoke hope. Not the hope of passive optimism that things would somehow get better, but the hope that prods one into action, into working for positive change.

So, if you want evidence that the Kingdom of God is indeed active and that the church is still an agent of that Kingdom, look around you and within you. Look for it not in terms of its size or prestige. Look for it in terms of the change it is fomenting, the lives that are being lifted from desperation to hope. We may not find it in the largest game in town, but if we look closely we will find it where the dreams of children are being realized, where opportunity is being extended to those whose lives have been blighted with disappointment and pain.

The Kingdom of God, you see, is not a towering empire. It is an unpretentious venture of faith, and as such it is world-transforming: "If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed," Jesus said, "you will say to this mountain, 'Move hence to yonder place,' and it will move" (Matt. 17:20). "It is faith," Robert Funk suggests, "which, in its unostentatious way, reorders the face of the world" [Robert Funk, *Interpretation*, 1973]; and I couldn't agree more.



