

Sermon July 26, 2020
"Mustard Seed Signals"
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Grace and Peace to you in the name of God our loving Creator and Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Hello again, everybody! Today is a special day for me because it is my ordination anniversary. It's been 12 years since my ordination at Mercy Seat in Northeast Minneapolis. It seems like a long time ago but that's where my journey as an official pastor began and I remember that service and celebration fondly. I think of all the people that were gathered from different places and long for those connections again. But these texts are special to me because every three years they sneak up on me and remind me that I've been in this call for another lectionary cycle.

Three years ago I was the visiting pastor at Holden Village when these texts snuck up on me and later that same day when I greeted the person that we thought was going to preach in the Village Center that night, we found out he wasn't prepared for it and so I had to jump into action as a preacher on short notice. I had the honor of filling in for one of the most respected Old Testament teachers in the world, and it was scary to do, and dramatic. It's a preaching experience that I remember fondly and a sermon I sometimes listen too when I have doubts about my call or preaching ability.

I had a conversation with my mother this week and she often reminds me of the power of preaching and how important it is to her life and others. And this week she told me she had been reading about how important preaching was to Martin Luther. He really held up preaching as the center of the church

experience. The Word, the gospel delivered from one person to another is the reason why we gather, and when the preacher may fail to deliver those goods with a clear voice, then the hymns, liturgy and sacraments help deliver the message that we are loved by God, and if God chooses not to judge us but save us. That is good news for us and for the neighbors that we may be tempted to judge rather than love.

We need that message again and again, delivered to ears that may or may not think they need to hear it on any given Sunday, but when the gospel message is planted in the heart, like a seed in the earth, it can grow in beautiful ways that we can't predict. And that message can be spread into the world, every day, as the message echoes in all of our words and actions.

That can sound dramatic and feel like a lot of pressure sometimes when you as a preacher struggling to compose a message each week, and when you feel stuck yourself. And there are plenty of things to get stuck in these days that can stuff our minds and our ears like plugs to keep from the gospel's invitation from sinking in. There's a band called the Hold Steady that sang a song around the time of my ordination called "Stuck Between Stations". All their songs combine lyrics about Catholic faith, the Twin Cities and drinking. And this one has those themes too, but this one line really preaches to me, "Most nights are crystal clear, but tonight it's like he's stuck between stations on the radio." I'm reminded of that feeling from childhood of leaning into the radio and longing for a strong signal of a ball game or a song from a faraway place.

And in order to preach, I'm reminded again and again that you need to lean in and listen for the gospel. Listen to God's activity in the world, listen to what people are going through in your parish, in your community, and halfway around the world. Luther said that, "If you were to ask a Christian what his task

is and by what he is worthy of the name Christian, there could be no other response than hearing the Word of God, that is faith. Ears are the only organs of the Christian.” In another place Luther says that “ears are the organs of conversion”.

I think our texts today are about ears and listening. Speaking and the other senses are important too, but there is a focus on the ears in my ordination texts, which for a preacher may feel like a big hint. I know I've tired out plenty of ears with my preaching!

In our Old Testament lesson today, Solomon who is just a boy, is asked in a dream by God, “What should I give you?” How would you respond to that question if God asked us what we would like to be given? This is the closest God gets to being a genie in a lamp.

I don't know if many of us would answer the way Solomon does, because Solomon essentially asks for good ears and a wise mind. He says, “9 Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?” And God responds, “12 I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. “

I don't know how many of you have felt like God has sent you messages in dreams but this message that Solomon receives changes something in him. He asks not for money or riches or power as many of us may be tempted to do. Solomon through this dream is reminded of what is most important and what he truly values. He wants to be a good leader for his people. He may have been tempted to make a big show of force and cover up his inexperience

and youth with extravagance but instead he is reminded that if he wants to be a good leader and if he wants their respect he needs to care about them and be a good listener. The Hebrew translation of what he is given is “ears to hear justice”.

It may seem like an ordinary thing compared to what he could have gotten, but it is the ordinary in our lives that God chooses to reveal his amazing grace.

Solomon says that he is only a little child and “doesn’t know how to go out or come in”. Going out and coming in is a way of describing the daily grind, patterns and practices for someone. It’s a way of saying that he doesn’t understand his vocation or occupation yet. Will Solomon be distracted by the drama of his position and power in the future “yes” as we all do, but here he knows his purpose and claims this prize, that is most valuable to him.

Wisdom and listening may seem like simple things, but our gospel lesson uses the description of things that are “ordinary” to reveal the kingdom of God that is in our midst. Someone that is baking bread, someone that is planting seed, someone that is fishing, someone that is a merchant. And rather than finding God while doing dramatic things it is in doing the ordinary that the kingdom of God is revealed.

This is such an important message for us and for this preacher, who has done some crazy and dramatic things like drive around the country to start a new ministry. I have often sought God in the dramatic. But God comes to us in the ordinary. And the question is, when the kingdom of God is revealed to us how do we respond. God’s grace is solid but small. It’s not in a giant building or cheering crowd, but in the smallest of seeds, a piece of land... a pearl. We can’t screw up God’s grace, it’s already there, but how do we honor it, hold it,

and share it. That's the kingdom. And it is revealed to those that have ears to hear and eyes to see this wonder in their midst. Jesus reminds us that the kingdom of God is at hand and the preacher reminds you of the same thing. In wine and bread at the communion table and in the daily bread we receive in our normal going out and coming in, of this place and our daily lives, when we have ears to hear it and eyes to see it.

Paul reminds us that we all can forget and feel like our weakness excludes us from the good company of the gospel but we are always connected. He says, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."

Another Paul reminded me of that recently. My girlfriend's son Paul has gotten so excited about walkie talkie's recently. If God asked him what he wanted, he may have said walkie talkie's a couple weeks ago. And we finally got some. One for each of us. And last night, I decided to bring the walkie talkie back to my place to see if we could hear each other between our apartments. Last night we couldn't connect but this morning I decided to give it another try and leaned in to hear... through a lot of fuzz over a mile away, Paul and Sarah's voice. ...And a little later I heard someone call and it was a guy talking to a woman named Joanie who seemed to be a little closer! But what a gift to lean in and listen and hear those voices.

There is so much fuzz to distract us from the gospel God has for us. Sometimes the fuzz comes from within or seeds planted by the enemy to keep us doubting ourselves and God or feeling that we are suffering and that is punishment from God. When we hear the gospel coming through in its "mustard seed signal" we know what is most important and we see the world in a different way.

I'll close with the Apostle Paul helping the Romans and us from getting caught in the interference when we feel we are stuck between stations in God's broadcast:

31 What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? 32 He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? 33 Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. 35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And with that signal in your ears...May the Peace that Passes all Understanding Keep Your Heart and Your Mind in Christ Jesus Our Lord. Amen.