

Parables: Jesus' Little Mind Bombs

Mark 4:26-34 June 17, 2018

I'm guessing it was about 1955 when I attended Vacation Bible School, which my parents didn't particularly approve of because my dad was totally closed to religion.

But, we lived in a little town of about 900 people and there wasn't much for kids to do over the long summer, so he let me go.

My VBS class was taught by my first-grade teacher, Mrs. Richardson, under a big oak tree outside The Chapel of the Hills.

I attended church a few times after VBS, but this was my only exposure to the faith for several decades.

Twenty years ago, I contacted that little church and asked if I could preach one Sunday.

My message was going to be based on the first of today's parables,

Mark 4:26-28 *"This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain...."*

I wanted to share that all those years ago Mrs. Richardson had been faithful and planted a seed, and while she may have thought she wasted her time with me, three or four decades later I became a minister.

I have no idea what bible lessons she taught, but I do remember the loving feeling of VBS, and that feeling stuck with me.

We plant the seed and trust God is at work, even when we see no evidence of it.

I would have liked that small congregation to know that the seed they planted eventually took root, but I never got to preach that sermon because some ministers guard their pulpits and don't welcome outsiders.

Too bad: I think Mrs. Richardson may still have been alive to have heard my message.

The gospels say that much of Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God was done through parables.

Some are deceptively simple and some are confounding from the get go.

Parables are like mental time bombs.

We hear them, we may think we understand them, but we get confused as we think more about them ... and then, tick, tick, tick, bam! a new insight explodes within us.

Understanding the full nature of the Kingdom of God is beyond us, and the Kingdom behaves in ways that often are upside down and inside out from our expectations.

So, Jesus planted these little mind bombs and let them tick within anyone who was willing.

Two cautions about Jesus' parables.

First, we like to turn mind-bending parables into simple allegories.

Allegories, like fables, are adequate as morality lessons, but they don't dig deep to challenge our preconceptions about the nature of things.

And parables take on different meanings as we mature and face different situations.

Parables are not so much to be understood as to be lived with.

Second, we don't live in the culture that Jesus taught in, so we may miss how his audience understood the elements of his parables.

This is certainly true in today's parables.

Let's shift gears for the moment and remember something we talked about last year when we walked through the first books of the Old Testament.

Genesis 12:1-4a *The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.*

*“I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing*

So Abram went,

Nowadays we expect to leave home to start our lives.

Sometimes it feels risky, but usually it is exciting.

We leave for college or for a new job ... a fresh start, a new beginning.

We set off to make a life of our own, and we grow-up as we face life’s challenges and we chalk up successes.

My son Ian and I were very close when he was in high school, but he insisted on moving away to a distant college – and he was right.

He learned that he could make it on his own.

He learned to be self-sufficient and to handle his own responsibilities.

But in Abram’s time, this was unthinkable; human consciousness had not yet evolved to the concept of an individual’s life journey.

In Abram’s world, life was considered to be an endlessly repeating circle lived out within your family or tribe, usually within a few miles of where you were born.

Maybe you’ve been to one of those workshops where you draw a life map on which you note your big transformative moments – the new job, the disease, the marriage, your first marathon.

When we envision our life journey, we think of a line – a linear progression.

But before Abram, people would have drawn a circle.

The life my grandparents had, my parents also had, and so I will have.

We will go through the same endless cycle of agricultural seasons, of having children, growing old and dying.

It will be the same for my children and theirs for all of history.

But in Genesis 12 something revolutionary happened.

A new god has appeared ... not one of the local deities that granted fertility or bountiful crops, but a god beyond Abram's tribe who called him to leave all that was familiar and to venture into a new life that promised to be different.

And this new god was not like the aloof deities Abram knew, each needing endless sacrifices to be appeased.

No, this god was personal, caring and involved in Abram's life.

And Abram went.

Abram didn't know what to expect, but for some reason he trusted this new god's promise.

Later descendants of his faith would look back at his life and realize we can trust this God, even when life feels confusing or cruel -
Romans 8:28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Now, we know how Abram's story unfolds, eventually giving rise to three great religions that represent 54% of the world's people.

But none of it would have happened if Abram had not trusted enough to take that first step into the unknown.

I've often wondered how many people God had previously called to follow Him to Palestine to become the father of many nations.

How many had been called but had not responded?

When life calls – maybe with an opportunity, maybe with a problem – we face a choice.

We either step into the challenge and grow stronger and wiser – or we can withdraw to what feels like safety but in the process regress and become weaker.

In the years to come, Abram would learn to trust God to fulfill His promise to make him a great nation, but the journey looked nothing like he had expected.

There were setbacks, conflicts – even the birth of a son to his ninety-year-old wife, and through the pages of scripture we share those experiences and see how God operates in our lives as well.

When we face new challenges we learn skills, we learn lessons (even if they aren't the lessons we'd like), and we reinforce to ourselves that we are the kind of person who takes on challenges.

When we withdraw, not only do we miss those lessons, we tell ourselves that we are weak.

Mark Twain wrote, "Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do."

And our experience with God tips the balance of whether to take on challenges and grow, or regress and become smaller.

I think of a woman I'll call Mary who stayed in an unhappy marriage for years because she didn't think she could handle all the demands of life on her own.

She'd gotten married right out of high school and so had never lived on her own.

Her husband provided a good standard of living, so life was comfortable ... except for his temper.

Every time he flew into a rage she considered leaving, but each time she failed to muster the courage.

More than once she went to the ER saying that she'd just fallen down the stairs.

The result was that over the years she kept reinforcing her sense of not being strong or capable.

Then one day when Mary was about fifty, her husband suddenly died from a stroke and she found herself alone – and not only that but with a family business that she soon discovered was deeply in debt.

Instead of having the luxury of licking her wounds, she was forced into action in order to save her livelihood.

She called her daughters for advice, and they connected her with attorneys and business consultants.

It turns out that there was lots of work to do, but it wasn't as baffling as she'd imagined.

In fact, she took a liking to it.

She renegotiated loans.

She laid-off some employees.

She streamlined their product line.

At the end of the year she was physically exhausted, but she says that she'd never felt better about herself or more hopeful about her future.

She turned to her faith for strength – in particular, a verse which I learned at last Monday's Council of Team Leaders meeting has helped many of you, too.

Philippians 4:13 *I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.*

Which takes us back to the lesson Jesus was giving with today's parable.

Actually, there is another parable attached to what we read today – one we all know about: the farmer spreading seed.

Some land on rocky soil and never sprout, some gets eaten by the birds, some sends up shoots too soon and shrivel, and some mature.

Jesus says that is what the Kingdom of God is like.

Now a word about the third parable, and a little bit about what Jesus' audience heard when he spoke about mustard plants and birds.

Mark 4:30-32 *Again he said, “(The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants*

Mustard was a valued spice, but a little bit went a long way and so not very much was cultivated.

For most farmers, the mustard plant was an invasive weed that would ruin a field of grain if not held at bay.

Not something that a farmer would plant.

Today Jesus might say that the Kingdom of God is like crab grass.

Once it takes root, all those orderly rows of flowers or tomato vines are threatened.

No doubt, Abram had had every expectation for a successful and predictable life back home in Harran.

He was married, and he apparently had some wealth.

But once he answered God’s call, all sorts events unfolded beyond his control.

He encountered angels, he battled neighboring kings, he risked his life to rescue relatives from Sodom ... the Kingdom has its own way of unfolding its promises, and many are not welcomed at the moment.

They may even feel like huge obstacles or threats.

But once we say “yes” to God, once the Divine goes to work, it can take off like weeds in a garden disrupting your best laid plans.

You may think, “I didn’t sign up for this.”

I’m sure Abram thought that more than once.

And then there are those birds.

Mark 4:32 *“Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”*

So, this unruly Kingdom provides shade and safety for those otherwise at the mercy of the merciless heat of Palestine.

I was thinking about those Arizona churches that go into the desert to leave water for the people sneaking across the border.

Some have been arrested for this, but they realize that thousands have died of thirst and exposure, so they feel they are answering God's call.

Remember? *When I was thirsty you gave me something to drink?*

But wait a minute:

Didn't we just hear about birds in Jesus' other parable?

Mark 4:4 *As (the farmer) was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.*

If you're a farmer, birds aren't your friends.

So, Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of God is like a weed that invades your field, threatens your well-planned crop, and protects birds that may eat your seeds.

The growth of the Kingdom is disruptive, out of our control, and follows different rules from the managers of our world.

Jesus' crazy message about the Kingdom of God seems a long way from religious institutions that try to manage our encounters with the Divine.

Jesus' Kingdom will always be at odds with our best laid plans and the interests of the power elite.

No wonder Jesus was murdered by the religious authorities conspiring with the political rulers.

Say yes to God, but then fasten your seat belt, and expect trouble from those who try to control our world.