

Matthew 13:31-32 We continue Jesus' short stories about God's empire. We've read the story of the farmer planting seed and the story about weeds in the wheat. Now Jesus tells a very short story about planting another seed.

31He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

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Now that's a short story! Two verses. One sentence. Bam!

Jesus is a good storyteller. Sometimes his stories are fairly easy to understand. Sometimes they're funny or thought-provoking. Sometimes he explains them. Sometimes they leave you with a furrowed brow, wondering what Jesus is saying.

This one seems to be about mustard. Do you like mustard? Do you like the plain yellow mustard or are you more fancy? "Pardon me, would you have any Grey Poupon?" Do you like Colonel Mustard? Or can you cut the mustard?

In Jesus' story here there's a small mustard seed, though this proverbial mustard seed isn't actually the smallest. And it doesn't grow into large trees. A lowly mustard plant is an annual herb that grows 2-6 feet high. An extraordinary mustard bush grows a little taller than that, but to call it a tree is pretty generous. Can birds make their nests in such branches?

When Jesus began preaching in the Gospel of Matthew, he said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."¹ The kingdom of heaven drew near to us in Jesus. In Jesus, the kingdom of heaven has already begun in the world, but it's not completed yet. Jesus always invites us to pray for it: Our Father, may your kingdom come, may your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus' story about the mustard seed seems to contrast the kingdom of heaven's beginning and the completion. God's action and sovereign rule in the world can be almost imperceptible like the very small mustard seed.

Think about it: Jesus had a small band of followers. At this point in the gospel, Jesus isn't even drawing the attention of Roman authorities. Jesus is seemingly just a confusing prophet to a defeated people out in the sticks of the Roman Empire.²

Even after Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension, the Book of Acts reports that there were only about 120 disciples of Jesus. Just tiny little mustard seeds planted in the soil.

**Major Claim
Upon Our Lives:**

The kingdom is what God is doing. One day you wake up to a different reality and you realize it's been here all along. Jesus is teaching us to see significance in the insignificant.

This short story is a call to faith in the Lord God Almighty who's active in a tiny movement initiated by Jesus. But Jesus is helping us see the significance in the seemingly insignificant.

The kingdom of heaven begins like a tiny mustard seed. But it's real, it's here, and in God's time the kingdom will come to full fruition. One day you wake up to a different reality and you realize it's been here all along.

So the kingdom of heaven is not strictly a future reality that will suddenly appear full-blown without any prior activity. Jesus' ministry has inaugurated the kingdom. We're invited to serve in that ministry as the body of Christ.

This story invites us into a new world where God is the primary reality. We're invited to leave behind the world that treats God as irrelevant³, that refuses to acknowledge its own true nature.

This requires a people, God's people, who refuse to be hurried, who will be patient. Being drawn into the kingdom of heaven is to participate in God's patience toward his creation.⁴

Sometimes the kingdom of heaven isn't readily apparent to the eye. It's just below the surface of things. It begins as a seed hidden in the ground. But it's real; it's here. God is at work. And one day, the seed is no longer hidden but revealed, and then it grows into a full grown tree.⁵

As the church, the body of Christ in the world, we serve that kingdom. The church isn't the same thing as the kingdom, but we point to the kingdom. We work and serve and witness and proclaim. And one day we wake up to a different reality and we realize it's been there all along.

Bishop N.T. Wright in England says they went out to plant a row of trees after storms had damaged some of the oaks that surrounded the ancient church. They had decided to remove them and plant new ones. The actual planting was to be done by some local schoolchildren, who were between seven and nine years old. They had never planted trees before and perhaps never even wondered how a tree came to be there. They stood beside the small holes already dug for the planting, looking at the trees that were still healthy and strong. The schoolteacher asked, "How long do you think these trees have been growing?"

The children squinted up at the old trees. One of them said, "Fifty years?"

"A hundred years?" said another.

The teacher said, "No, about 200 years, actually. And they're still growing."

The children looked at each other in amazement. One of them said, "My dad's 42."

"My mum's 35," said another, with the same idea struggling to find expression.

Another child said, "So how long will it take before these trees we're planting are grown up?"

The teacher smiled. "A hundred years at least," she said. "Why don't you come back when you're 150 and see how they're doing?"

Bishop Wright says, Like an architect designing a great cathedral, when you plant a tree you do so in the knowledge that you won't live to see it grow to full height.

In Jesus' short story, Jesus looks back at the time when the Word of God planted the seed of the kingdom of heaven. Prophets had spoken of it. Holy people had prayed for it to come. Hard-working, faithful people had tilled the ground, studied the scriptures, longed for the kingdom. And they had died before it arrived.

Now, by the lakeshore, Jesus was saying that his disciples, young men who hadn't done all that, were seeing the day dawn at last. They were like small children standing beside great oak trees planted hundreds of years before. And, like those children, they only partly understood what was happening and how it would all work out.⁶

We know all about what it's like to have trees blown down in a storm.⁷ At our staff meeting this past week we talked about the sadness of losing all these trees. Where are the birds? Where are the squirrels? It had been there all along but we took it for granted. Suddenly, it's not there and we realize it.

We'll plant more trees, placing little seeds or saplings in the ground. But we may not be the ones to appreciate them and benefit from them. We'll have to be patient, trusting that it's happening. But it will take a long time.

How long? Some of the trees that were blown down could be 200 years old.

But some day, one day, someone will stand there and say, "Wow, what amazing trees!" They've been growing all this time. But it's like they just noticed how wonderfully beautiful and strong they are, the shade they give, the shelter for the birds and squirrels, the cleaner air they give us.

It's like they just woke up to a different reality but of course it's been there all along. Just like the kingdom of heaven.

This has been a difficult year for us. When times are tough we ask lots of questions. Is God there? Does God care? Why are these bad things happening? When will God's kingdom be fully realized?

New Testament professor Amy-Jill Levine says the challenge of this parable, this short story is this: don't ask when or where the kingdom comes. When? In its own good time, as long as it takes for seed to sprout. Where? It's already present in the world⁸ (it came near in Jesus).

The kingdom of heaven is real, it's here, and in God's time the kingdom will come to full fruition. One day you wake up to a different reality and you realize it's been here all along.

Let anyone with ears to hear, listen.

¹Matthew 4:17

²Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, p. 133

³Douglas R.A. Hare, *Interpretation: Matthew*, p. 156

⁴Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, p. 133

⁵Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven*, p. 43

⁶N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, WestminsterJohnKnox Press, Louisville, KY, 2004

⁷The derecho (inland hurricane) on August 10, 2020 destroyed a majority of Cedar Rapids' tree canopy

⁸Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, p. 167