



# SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## Sermon for Sunday, June 17, 2018

*The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost*

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Ezekiel 17:22-24 | Psalm 92:1-4, 11-14 | 2 Corinthians 5:6-17 | Mark 4:26-34

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts together be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.*

I don't know if the makers of the lectionary considered the physical seasons as well as the liturgical seasons when they put together the readings for the church year, but they did assign a lot of readings about seeds, plants, and growing things for the summer months. These readings fit what we see and smell all around us: the trees fully green, the flowers blooming, and the air fragrant with locust and roses. Those of us who have recently planted seeds watch eagerly for each slender shoot to push up through the soil. Those with established plants are enjoying the blooms and watching for fruit to set or for new blossoms to show where the tomatoes and peppers will come. Out in the countryside, the first hay cut is done and the round bales fill the fields. So when the prophet and the psalm and Jesus tell us that the reign of God is like growing things, we can look around and see what they mean. That's how parables work: they tell us that God's work is similar to things around us in daily life; they're not exact parallels or allegories, but rather are rich expressions of complex realities for us to ponder and explore.

In the parable of the broadcast seed, Jesus says that all of the stages of growth are like the reign of God: the seed sprouting and growing, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain, and finally the harvest. We tend to think of the reign of God coming at the end: the harvest is a strong metaphor for the end of time, and there are other parables and metaphors that use the harvest to indicate the culmination of all life. But here, Jesus says that everything, from seed to harvest, is what the reign of God is like: God's work is in every step. Not that growth is inevitable or even predictable. The story says that this farmer does not understand how growth happens and has nothing to do with it: he plants the seeds and then goes away to his everyday life. He doesn't understand how growth happens, and that's not because he was farming in the ancient Near East: farmers then knew enough to save seed from one year to the next, and when to sow it. There is a deep mystery in the growing process. Even with our greater knowledge of plant biology, we have to admit that why things grow is fundamentally a mystery: every gardener has had the experience of having to shrug and say, "I don't know why that plant is

thriving here, but that other one is not thriving there." The earth produces of itself, and we don't understand it fully but we can see where growth is happening and rejoice in it and benefit from it. Jesus says the reign of God is like all of that.

Jesus then likens the reign of God to a mustard seed, and again his emphasis is on the process of transformation in growth, and the deep mystery in that transition. It is amazing, after all, that big, lush, colorful plants come out of hard little things that have no color or hint of life about them. It doesn't matter that the mustard seed isn't the smallest seed of all, nor that the mustard plant isn't the biggest tree or even the greatest shrub on earth: this is a parable, tossed off the cuff, not an allegory painstakingly worked out in every detail. Jesus points to the process of transformation and the end result of that growth: the reign of God puts out lush growth that all kinds of creatures can nurture and rest in. "It becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

Did that ending of the parable make you sit up & say, "wait—didn't we just hear something like that?" Yes, we did: a very similar outcome is described by Ezekiel in his vision of God's work: God takes a cutting from a cedar and plants it on a mountain "that it may bring forth boughs and bear fruit and become a noble cedar; and under it will dwell all kinds of beasts; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest." I'm willing to bet that some of Jesus' disciples thought of this cedar when Jesus talked about what the mustard plant would provide; I know that the lectionary planners paired Ezekiel's vision with Jesus' parable so that we would put them together. God's work is to take what is small and make it great, to take what cannot live or produce on its own and provide the growth that will make it a full plant that is a source for others. See how God's work ends up: a tree that is beautiful, green and lush; birds fly to & fro, building nests and feeding their young; animals nestle underneath it. Picture a great cedar in the Pacific Northwest or Scandinavia; picture a whole field bright with mustard blossom. It's beautiful, restful, and plentiful.

Sounds like heaven, doesn't it? So it does—and both Ezekiel's cedar tree and Jesus' talk of the harvest and mustard plant are

indeed promises of what the reign of God will be like when it has fully come. These are eschatological visions that hold out hope for the future. It doesn't take much looking around the world or the neighborhood to know that the reign of God has not arrived. And yet: Jesus proclaimed that God's reign is not just something we hope for and look forward to at the end of time. Jesus announced that the reign of God is already here, that it is among us, that we are called to live in that reign now. So it is that Jesus says the reign of God is like the whole process of the growing cycle: God's reign is in the planting and the first shoots, in the bud and in the full grain, as well as in the final harvest. God's reign is in the mustard seed just as it will be in the lush plant. God is reigning when God first takes the cutting from the cedar tree and plants it on the mountain and waits for it to grow. Like every gardener in June, God sees the lush, abundant growth ahead in each seedling poking up through the ground and in the first blossoms on the pepper plants. What will be there at the end is already here now, in potential and in hope. As Paul puts it, "if anyone be in Christ, behold: there is a new creation!" Beloved, we are that new creation.

So let us not lose God's hope for growth and abundance. Let us not lose God's vision of a great, green, lush place where there is shade and rest and beauty for everyone. God invites us to be a part of the growth process: we, too, can scatter seed all around us; we too can put out our shoots for them to grow to fruitfulness. Each seed and each new plant is a small thing; those early seed leaves are fragile and new shoots don't look like much. So you may feel that your one act of kindness, your one letter or phone call, your one action or conversation does not accomplish or mean much. But do it anyway: that's how to grow and feed growth, in you and in others. And such action is the only way to live in the reign of God now. Seed or shoot, grain or fruit, we live in God's reign now. God will give the increase, because God is bringing in a reign of lush, fruitful beauty.

“The righteous flourish like the palm tree,  
And grow like a cedar in Lebanon.  
They are planted in the house of the Lord,  
They flourish in the courts of our God.”

Amen.