

Morning Worship Services

Sunday, December 21, 2008

Face to Face: New Beginnings

“Face to Face with Faith”

Mark 4:30-34

Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh, Senior Pastor

For followers of Jesus, Advent is about remembering Jesus’ first coming and anticipating his second coming.

For followers of Jesus, Advent is about regeneration. Regeneration is “a secret act of God in which he imparts new spiritual life to us.”¹

For followers of Jesus, Advent is about repentance. Repentance is “heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ.”²

For followers of Jesus, Advent is about faith. “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”³

Almost 200 years ago, Thomas Jefferson commissioned Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to find the source of the Missouri River, and from there to discover a relatively easy water route west to the Pacific. Such a waterway, they discovered, doesn’t exist. But they did succeed in mapping the Northwest. And, fifteen months after they began pushing themselves upstream, they found, near today’s Montana-Idaho border, the source of the Missouri River. The Missouri at its source looks a lot different than the powerful current that flows into the Mississippi River near St. Louis. In the Kingdom of God, many great things start out small.

“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”⁴ Today’s text is a parable about faith. A parable is a teaching device. Parables are illustrations from everyday life which convey spiritual truths. In this case, the parable is drawn from a commonly used proverbial expression; the mustard seed. Though it is never mentioned in the Old Testament, many varieties of mustard plants grew in abundance in and around Palestine. Some grew in the wild. Others were cultivated for various purposes. In the New Testament Jesus

¹Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, 492.

²Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 492.

³Hebrews 11:1

⁴Ibid.

compares faith to a grain of mustard seed.⁵

Faith begins as a very small thing; a grain of mustard seed. It is not the greatness of our faith, but the greatness of our God that is the follower of Jesus' focus. Too many have faith in faith. We must never imagine that there is some power to faith. It is not faith that moves the mountain; but Jesus Christ. The question is not, "How much faith do I have;" but "What is the object of my faith?" With God, nothing is impossible. Nothing can stand in the way of, hinder the person who, being called of God, believes him. It was impossible for the Red Sea to stop the march of God's elect, because Moses believed God. The walls of Jericho fell, because Joshua believed God. The land of Canaan was occupied, because Caleb believed God. The Philistine giant Goliath died, because David believed God. Jairus' daughter lived, because Jairus believed God.

Followers of Jesus live by the mustard seed. The Kingdom of God advances by the mustard seed. Followers of Jesus scatter the mustard seed. God's field, the wheat and the tares, is the context in which followers of Jesus fulfill the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. Followers of Jesus scatter the seed and await the harvest.

The mustard seed implicates followers of Jesus. As we come face to face with Jesus, we are changed. Each follower must come to terms with what he believes about the Bible, God's Kingdom growing in the world, the role of the Church in advancing the Kingdom, the world as a community of mixed inhabitants and the method of Jesus' teaching.

People, who think themselves wise, pass judgment upon the Bible. They claim to be people of faith, yet deny the veracity of the Bible. I often hear people say, "I believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God; but I do not think you have to take it too seriously." Regrettably, that comment represents the opinion of many who profess to be followers of Jesus. In this day of spiritual darkness and perversion, there is an abandonment of belief in the inspiration of God's holy, authoritative and infallible Word by many who claim to be followers of Jesus.

Once the mustard seed of faith is planted, it grows. Individuals grow; the Church grows; the Kingdom of God grows and advances. The expression, "as a grain of mustard seed" was a common, proverbial saying among the Jews, referring to anything small and insignificant. The parable of the mustard seed is prophetic. Jesus told his disciples not to despise the day of small things. Though it appeared a small seed, Jesus proclaimed that his Kingdom would become great. Wherever followers of Jesus go, they are to scatter mustard seeds; seeds of God unto

⁵Matthew 17:14-21

salvation.⁶

Though no one who is "of the world" knows it, the Church is the manifestation of God's rule, the Kingdom of God on earth. The Church is to have a sanctifying effect upon society one individual at a time. This is what is meant by the phrase, "the birds of the air can perch in its (the plant of the mustard seed) shade." Like a great tree, the Kingdom of God, through the Church, provides shelter for the world. The Kingdom of God provides shelter for "the wheat and tares", and its influence is for good.⁷ 1 Corinthians 7 is an example of this. As in a home, the unbelieving are sanctified by the believing. So is the case in the world; the unbelieving are sanctified by the believing. Education made limited impact on improving the moral condition of the Greek and Roman worlds. Plato and Aristotle made limited impact upon society for moral good. That which has improved every society, every culture, every family and every relationship under its influence is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The birds of the air represent the mixed multitude in the world. The Kingdom of God struggles with the Kingdom of this world. God has chosen to advance his Kingdom through the Church. According to the parable of the mustard seed, the Kingdom of God is a nesting place for birds clean and unclean. It is not an enclosed garden; but one with wheat and tares growing side by side. The Kingdom of God is a shelter to the world. And some (crows, tares and goats) will rest in it unknowingly and unrecognizable to the King.

When Jesus taught and preached, he did so in the simplest manner possible. Jesus told stories. Jesus communicated in such a way that people understood what he said. He never tried to impress his hearers with how smart a man he was or how much he knew. Followers of Jesus must not try to impress men. We are to instruct men. Jesus taught with plainness and simplicity; knowledge and understanding. Jeremiah writes, "And I will give you pastors according to my heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding."⁸ Jesus expounded upon all things to his disciples.

The crows, tares and goats are doing their best to frustrate and stop followers of Jesus from scattering of the seeds of the gospel. Regarding the authority of the Bible: the Progressive view reduces the authority of the Bible to a level that is equal to, and at times less than, the authority of personal experience; regarding the saving work of Jesus Christ: the Progressive view is reluctant to claim that salvation is through Jesus Christ alone; regarding the nature of Truth: the Progressive view makes truth relative by embracing plurality on essentials and allowing limitless

⁶Romans 1:14-17; 1 Corinthians 1:21-31; Matthew 16:18

⁷1 Corinthians 7:14

expressions of conscience as well as ethical practices.

God is building his Kingdom through the Church. He is gathering his elect.⁹ As you recall, Charlie Peace was a hardened 19th century criminal in London, England. On July 4, 1854, Charlie Peace was hung. The Anglican Church had a ceremony for hanging people. When Charlie Peace was marched to the gallows, a priest read these words from the Prayer Book: "Those who die without Christ experience hell, which is the pain of forever dying without the release which death itself can bring." When these chilling words were read, Charlie Peace stopped in his tracks, turned to the priest, and shouted, "Do you believe that?" The priest paused a moment and said, "I do." "Well, I don't," said Charlie. "But if I did, I'd get down on my hands and knees and crawl all over Great Britain, even if it were paved with pieces of broken glass, if I could rescue one person from what you just told me."¹⁰ "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."¹¹

Advent from the Latin, *Adventus*, means "coming." Advent commemorates the coming of Jesus Christ; the first time in Bethlehem and the second when he returns to receive his bride and consummate the new heaven and new earth. Advent is about new beginnings: the second coming, regeneration, repentance and faith. Jerome writes this about the first followers of Jesus, "There must have been something divinely compelling in the face of the Savior. Otherwise they would not have acted so irrationally as to follow a man whom they had never seen before. There was something divine in the Savior's very countenance that men, seeing, could not resist."¹²

Followers of Jesus, scatter the mustard seed. Come out of seclusion. Go to your jobs, neighborhoods and homes. Tell others about Jesus. Grow the Kingdom of God through the Church. Face to face with Jesus. Come closer. Be changed. Let us pray!

*This sermon was preached on Sunday, 21 December 2008 by the Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh
at Eastminster Presbyterian Church in Wichita, Kansas.*

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⁸Jeremiah 3:15

⁹Isaiah 56:8

¹⁰Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You A Story* (Nashville, Tennessee: W Publishing Group, 2000), 102-103.

¹¹Hebrews 11:1-3

¹²Jerome, *Homily 83*.

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