

Wonders All Around and Within Ezekiel 17:22-24; II Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17; Mark 4:26-34; Psalm 92: 1-4, 12-15 6-18-06

Have you noticed anything different about this spring? The birdsong has been incredible. Either I have become more sensitive to it or it has, indeed, been sheer melody. We seem to be surrounded by the music of nature. There have even been a few times when I have asked a particularly vocal bird to tone it down a bit.

There are far more blossoms on the dogwood tree at the parsonage than I recall from the past few springs. The house was full of the wonderful smell of lilacs in bloom in my neighbors' yards just a few days ago. And a hosta, almost overtaken by Japanese knotweed, which I grow in great abundance, has doubled in its size. Perhaps, this is all due to our mild winter or our abundance of rain—I am not sure. But I do know there are wonders all around us.

I always notice nature. I have since a child. I owe much of this to my father. My father knew and loved the natural world all around us. He gave me the gift of the observation of its wonders-- a gift for which I will always be grateful. Indulge me for a moment while I reflect very briefly on him this Father's Day.

I am the distant youngest of three children, a surprise child, who had the closest relationship with my dad of the three of us. We spent lots of time together as I was growing up--either visiting the zoo on Sunday mornings, or in a boat fishing away his summer vacations or sighting in his deer rifle in the fall. In the summer, he loved to grill using his Weber, I am sure it was the original one. I will never forget his experiments in concocting barbeque sauce for chicken. I should have expected this, he was a chemist, after all and he made a wonderful sauce combining ingredients in special proportions that would produce precisely the end product he wanted.

We usually enjoyed the time we had together and only exchanged some feisty words when he was trying to teach me how to drive. Oh, my.... We both gave up on this endeavor and I finally conquered this challenge several years after "normal" children did. Our times away from the rest of the family were times to observe the wonders of nature we saw all around us, from water snakes to bears, interesting trees and strange vegetation. He would have loved the variety of nature found here. But he never would have moved here, he was never one to take risks. He was a cautious man. He studied and evaluated everything before he made a move. This is a characteristic I never have shared. He also was a religious man in his own way although he steered clear of the institutional church. I am certain he has often been puzzled over what I have been doing for the past quarter century. Regrettably, he died at the age of fifty-nine when I was expecting my first child at the age of twenty-five. I have missed his counsel and his wisdom. I have missed my daughters having a grandfather. I have missed continuing to see the world through his eyes and mind and heart.

In Ezekiel this morning, God spoke in the terms of the natural world to point to the power he would use to secure the future of the nation Israel. God uses a messianic allegory in our reading. From a sprig of cedar would come a mighty tree providing shelter for all and a spokesperson for God for his beloved children. Using imagery, familiar to those who would hear the prophet Ezekiel, God ensured their understanding of what was to come. There would be one who would lead them in paths of righteousness, they needed to keep their eyes open so they would not miss him. Through this prophecy, hope was offered to the nation Israel.

Hope was offered to the disciples of Jesus in that tiny mustard seed used as an illustration for the possible growth of God's kingdom. Jesus' parables were full of objects familiar to those who listened to him. He strove to make his complex message simple so that the people gathered around him could grasp the eternal truths of God's power, love and goodness and how vital these truths were in their lives. From outward and visible wonders he tried to plant the seeds of a new way of life that would blossom deep within the hearts and souls and minds of his disciples bearing good and lasting fruit. It was not always an easy task. It seemed at times as if there was a mighty disconnect between his words and their actions. But, this should not surprise us, the same disconnect often exists for us in our day and age. We hear the same old stories and

parables packed with meaning that reach to us from the past and that try to guide us into the future but we do not always comprehend. So we try again.

The story of the mustard seed is one meant to encourage great growth of our faith deep within us as well as in our community of faith. With the proper nurture the tiniest entity can grow into something that becomes self-supporting and able to support others. The seeds of growth are within each of us. Our task is to discover how best to grow them. For most of us that is through gathering with people who share our beliefs. Our faith is one that is meant to be practiced in company, it is deeply relational. We can see this when we consider the teachings of Christ. His teachings were all about relationships.

The need we have to love, forgive, understand and forbear one another is not something that thrives in a vacuum. We need to interact with one another in the best ways possible to encourage the growth of our faith in ourselves, our God and our fellow humans. We cannot always see this growth but it is one of the many wonders that take place within our hearts and souls and beings. How it takes place, Jesus reminds us, is a mystery, it is by the grace of a God who loves and cherishes us.

Second Corinthians reminds us that if we are in Christ, all things are made new. All of life changes for us. We turn from our old tired ways of living that did not work and see things with fresh new eyes. But, we do not just see things, we begin to act on what it is we finally understand. The dawning light that breaks on our souls is sometimes slow in coming but when it arrives we know it. While we continue to dwell in this life in our bodies, we are to grow and change into imitations of Christ, poor though they may be. We may long for the time when we will be with God for once and for all, but we need to be effective witnesses to the gospel while we are still here. I believe we do this best through the example of our lives. Jesus thought this also. That is why he worked so hard to help others see the necessity of new growth.

That is our job, too, as members of the present day church. We are called to sow seeds of hope and seeds of the way of life Jesus showed us. Whether we are a father or a mother, a sister or a brother, a friend, we are needed to put little seeds of thought and wisdom into the minds and hearts of others so that there will come a day when we do discover the kingdom of God which is among and within us.

We need to accept that some of these tiny seeds will fall on the rocky soil of some hearts and minds and never take hold. Or that some will land in shallow soil and burst forth in glory for a moment or two and then die away. But we must never lose heart, we must not. For some will land in soil that is ready for them, in soil that is hungry for the good news, and it will take deep and lasting root and grow sturdy enough to support others, produce more seed and continue the process.

That is how we have gotten to where we are this morning. Through the slow and steady efforts of those who have cared enough about the message of Jesus to take the time to journey with us and love us even when we are unlovable; those who have chosen to teach us, even when we resist the lessons; those who have chosen to bear with us, even when we can be a bit unbearable.

The promise of a new way of life is there before us, in the words God shared with Ezekiel, in the letter of Paul and in the gospel of Mark. The promise is all around us in the wonders of the natural world and in the wonders hidden deep within us. Find those wonders and share them in love. Amen