

Mark 4:26-34 - Year B, Proper 6.

+In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Perhaps it is partly because I only get to be here, at St Luke's, so infrequently, that every time I see the restoration of nature project, I feel fresh awe. Those of you who are here more often probably notice some of the subtler way in which the plants grow and change through the seasons. But, while I don't get the slow, gradual change, I have been getting the treat of seeing how dramatically different our campus looks as the seasons and years pass.

It is a similar story with our godson, Isaac. Isaac is the 16-month-old son of some good friends that we made at seminary. And until just last month—when I graduated and we moved back Maryland—we saw Isaac several times a week. Yesterday, Isaac's Dad texted with a photo of him. Already he looks so much older! Of course, we all know how quickly babies change and grow—there is something new every day—but it's only when we take the time to think back or to look at photos that we see just how much those little changes add up. I find it takes a real mental effort to believe that the toddler running around with a ball is the same child who could barely roll over a year ago.

There really is something elusive about the way time passes, and the way both we and the world around us change. There is so much to take-in that we never seem to be able to see both the details *and* the big picture. I wonder if we were asked to give an account of how we grew into the people we are, how many of us could give a really satisfying account. Even our own lives are a kind of mystery to us.

It is little wonder that Jesus seems to struggle to find the words to explain the growth of God's kingdom to us. In today's Gospel, having told a parable in which the Kingdom of God is like a growing seed, Jesus is evidently unsatisfied. He stops and asks first "With what can we compare the Kingdom of God?" and then again, for emphasis "what parable will we use for it?" Then he tells another slightly different parable. In the first parable we get to see the little stages in which God gives growth to the seed: "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the

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ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.” In this first parable we are able to see what God is doing, and we watch with expectant hope as the Kingdom slowly emerges and grows into an abundance.

But, in the second parable, the narrative moves quickly. First there is a tiny seed then there is a great shrub with birds nesting in its branches! It is as though the justice, peace and joy of God's kingdom appear as a surprise as if from nowhere. Jesus message here is one of reassurance. You may see the signs of God's Kingdom growing-up amongst us—or you may not—but God's is at work bringing about that abundant *justice, peace, and joy* (Romans 14:17).

In January, I and most of the senior class at seminary were required to sit the General Ordination Exams. These are a standard part of the preparation for priesthood in the Episcopal Church. We sat six 3 1/2 hour exams over 4 days as we were tested in our proficiency in the Holy Scriptures; Church History, Theology, Ethics and Moral Theology; Christian Worship, and the Practice of Ministry. The Seminary put a great deal of effort onto equipping us to pass these exams. But—while we correctly expect that our clergy have a level competence in these areas—I doubt that I need to tell you that academic proficiency is not enough to make a good priest. On the morning of our graduation, Bishop Jim Mathes, who had been our Dean of Students, reflected that, for all their institutional pride, there really isn't a great deal that a seminary can do to form its students into clergy. Most of our formation, Bishop Mathes acknowledged, had happened in ways that were invisible to him. And yet he could see we had all grown and changed in our three years at Seminary. Paul plants, Apollos waters, but God gives the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6)

Of course, there is nothing particularly special about a seminary. We have all of asked God to form us more deeply in God's image. It is what we hope for in Baptism, in the Eucharist, and in our regular practice of repentance. We all hope that, in the words of the letter to the Ephesians, that we will grow into “the full stature of Christ” (4:13). And God, invisibly, goes about working that growth in us. It is growth that happens in our relationships to those around us, growth that happens in our prayer lives, in our successes and failures, our joys and our suffering, growth that God works slowly in the tender places of our hearts. Sometimes it is hard to see. Sometimes it is

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painful or confusing. Seldom is it the growth the kind of growth we thought we needed. But seen or unseen, acknowledged or not, the Kingdom of God grows. It grows in us and around us.

This is my last Sunday with you at St Luke's. God willing and the people consenting, two weeks from now I shall be beginning my priestly ministry as I preside at Eucharist for the first time at St John's, Western Run. I can't tell you how important your support has been to Ron and I over these last five years. Jesus tells us that the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds. Well, St Luke's is not quite the smallest of all parishes. But, let's be honest, we're not a great deal larger. But, like that great shrub that offers a home to the birds. St Luke's manages to offer hospitality to many: not just to our members, but to food pantry clients, to those groups who use our facilities, and the people who enjoy our much needed green space. And, yes, to the birds who make their nests in the branches, and to turtles and deer, and to all kinds of native plants. It is by trusting that the Kingdom of God is growing about us that St Luke's is able to offer so much to so many. And so I pray that you will continue to walk by faith and not by sight, and that you will frequently be surprised to find the Kingdom of God blossoming in unlikely places. Amen.