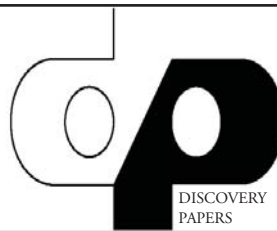


SEEDS OF HOPE

SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK



Catalog No. 5280
Mark 4:1-20
11th Message
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July 27, 2008

A depressing story can still be a good story if it gives you reason to hope. The film *The Mission* is such a story. Jesuit priests build a mission in a South American jungle and minister to a tribe of natives. European colonials, however, want to enslave the natives, so they burn the mission and kill many of the priests and natives. The would-be story of redemption meets with a violent end. In the last scene, however, the surviving children salvage supplies from the burned mission, pluck a broken violin from the river, and paddle into the future in a canoe. The last scene gives us reason to hope that the work of the mission will live on in the lives of the children.¹

In Mark 4, Jesus begins teaching in parables, world-shaking stories that explain how the kingdom of God is breaking into the world in and through Jesus and his followers.² The first one—the parable of the sower—is like *The Mission*. It's a mostly depressing story about the fate of the gospel but nevertheless features a flash of hope. In our world, resistance to the gospel often marginalizes those of us who adhere to it and may tempt us to give up on its mission. We need a flash of hope. The parable of the sower gives us one.

Mark 4:1-20:

He began to teach again by the sea. And such a very large crowd gathered to Him that He got into a boat in the sea and sat down; and the whole crowd was by the sea on the land. And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching, "Listen to this! Behold, the sower went out to sow; as he was sowing, some seed fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on the rocky ground where it did not have much soil; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of soil. And after the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. Other seeds fell into the good soil, and as they grew up and increased, they yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold." And He was saying, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

As soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables. And He was saying to them, "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables, so that WHILE SEEING, THEY MAY SEE AND NOT PERCEIVE, AND WHILE HEARING, THEY MAY HEAR AND NOT UNDERSTAND, OTHERWISE THEY

MIGHT RETURN AND BE FORGIVEN."

And He said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones who are beside the road where the word is sown; and when they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word which has been sown in them. In a similar way these are the ones on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; and they have no firm root in themselves, but are only temporary; then, when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. And those are the ones on whom seed was sown on the good soil; and they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold."

The parable of the sower

Jesus begins teaching in parables after sensing that his life and mission are in danger. The Pharisees concluded that he was such a menace that they began conspiring to put him to death. Jesus then withdrew to the Sea of Galilee and to a mountain, but when he returned to the seaside town of Capernaum, a hostile delegation of scribes from Jerusalem tracked him down and accused him of being in league with the devil (Mark 3). Jesus has won over the masses by healing the sick and liberating the possessed, but his inclusive and seemingly unpatriotic message has provoked controversy wherever he has gone. He doesn't stop preaching, nor does he water down his message, but he forsakes the synagogue for the open air of the seashore and begins teaching cryptically. For those with ears to hear, the parables explain what is happening and what will happen in and through Jesus and his followers.

Using a boat as a pulpit, Jesus tells the crowd that has followed him a parable about a farmer who fails with three types of ground but nevertheless realizes a bumper crop with good soil. The story echoes Isaiah 55:10-11, where God said he would liberate Israel from captivity in Babylon and bring it back to the Promised Land:

For as the rain and snow come down from heaven,
And do not return there without watering the earth
And making it bear and sprout,

And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater;

So will my word be which goes forth from My mouth;

It will not return to Me empty,

Without accomplishing what I desire,

And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.

God did, in fact, liberate his people from Babylon, but the Jews of Jesus' day were still waiting for something more, for they were living as aliens in their own land under Roman rule. At least some of Jesus' hearers would understand that the parable of the sower concerned the greater return from exile for which they hoped.

Jesus, who introduced the parable with an invitation to "listen," concludes it with the words, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Two prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, employed similar wording to accuse their contemporaries of being spiritually blind and deaf and of provoking God to send the nation into exile (Jeremiah 5:21, Ezekiel 12:2). Jesus, in contrast, is hoping that at least some in his seaside congregation will be more receptive as he preaches—however enigmatically—that God is acting in a new way to bring about the true return from exile.

A story that awakens dreams

Jesus' message was so explosive that he needed to take extreme care in delivering it. The mere fact that he employed parables reminds us that Jesus was not aiming simply to save people for heaven or impart helpful advice but rather to reorder the world. If you're simply trying to save people for heaven and impart helpful advice, you pose no threat to the powers of this world. If, however, the gospel concerns the in-breaking of the rule of God, then the rulers of this world and all those with designs on it are called to account. North America today is far more accommodating than the world of Jesus' day. Here, you can believe anything you want to believe—provided that you don't foist your beliefs on others. And even if you are a little too forceful, no one's going to throw you in jail, much less crucify you.

In such a world as ours, it's easy to screen out the explosive nature of Jesus' message. The church in North America has largely accommodated itself to our culture by perpetuating the non-threatening message that the gospel is simply about getting a few more individuals into heaven and relaying some helpful advice on how to live before you fly away. Such a "gospel" doesn't challenge our world with what it really needs: the message that God is establishing his rule on earth through the Lord Jesus Christ.

In its day, the parable of the sower, with Isaiah 55 in the background, spoke to those who pined for something more. Our world also pines, doesn't it? We pine for a new world. The gospel declares that such a world is coming and is present even now in the Holy Spirit who reigns in and through God's people. The parable invites us to believe,

despite appearances, that seeds have been and are being sown that are producing and will produce a new world. The parable therefore speaks to the deepest longings of the human heart for a world without pain and sickness and death. He who has ears to hear, let him hear: let the parable awaken your dreams for a better world.

Some of the best stories, like *The Mission*, do that, don't they? They awaken something within us—something that pines for more. The parable of the sower is that kind of story. It is a story of failure that nevertheless climaxes in success. Because it seems as if our world is failing and that we are failing in the world, such a story resonates with both our experience and our longings. We know things aren't going so well, but we need to hope for something better. The parable of the sower inspires hope.

The effect of the parables

Mark tells us that Jesus would regularly explain the meaning of his parables in private settings with his disciples (Mark 4:33-34). Although he reports that Jesus taught a series of parables from the boat, Mark inserts a later private session into his narrative in order to highlight both the effect of Jesus' parables and Jesus' explanation of the parable of the sower.

The parables as a whole both reveal and conceal the nature of kingdom of God. To those who are following Jesus, the parables are revealing. To those who have rejected him, the parables remain a mystery. The private session in Mark 4:10-20 includes not only Jesus' twelve disciples but also those who are literally "around him." Jesus earlier identified those who were unrelated to him as his family members because they were sitting "around him," even though his flesh-and-blood family members were nearby. Those who accept his teaching have been given "the mystery of the kingdom of God," which includes explanations concerning the meaning of the parables. Jesus reveals the mystery to some, although it remains so profound that one could never completely penetrate it. However, those who place themselves "outside" by rejecting his teaching "get everything in parables" that they can't comprehend.

In part, Jesus teaches in parables to avoid arrest. His preaching has already drawn the attention of powerful enemies. To continue preaching his controversial message in a straightforward manner would draw even more unwanted attention and place his mission in further danger. Therefore, he teaches cryptically, in parables, intriguing those who are receptive to his message but confounding those who are opposed to it.

Invoking the words of Isaiah, Jesus sees himself in the stream of the prophet who preached in parables to hardened people. Jesus is not saying that he doesn't want certain people to "return and be forgiven"; he's

saying that certain people *won't* return and be forgiven. He's is not so much intending to divide as he is describing what must inevitably take place.⁴

The mystery is ours

Today, as in the first century, Jesus both intrigues and confounds with his parables. Depending on your disposition towards the gospel, the parables of Jesus either soften your heart or harden your heart—you embrace them as world-shaking stories of the kingdom of God or you dismiss them as irrelevant. A parable of Jesus—indeed, all truth—is like the sun, which has the capacity to soften or harden a substance depending on the makeup of that substance.

I lived for a while in Redding, California, one of the hottest places in the state during the summer. One day, the temperature reached 118 degrees. That particular year was a drought year, and Shasta Lake was down. Ground that was no longer underwater turned to mud; then, the sun-baked mud cracked and became as hard as concrete. One afternoon, I left a hard plastic rod cast in my car. When I returned, it had melted into the shape of a pretzel. The Redding sun hardened one substance but melted another. The parables of Jesus soften some hearts but harden others.

If you embrace the parables, Jesus says to you, “To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God.” Really? Yes. Does that mean you instantly understand the parables and assimilate them into your life? Probably not. It means you want to understand the meaning of the parables, and wanting to understand prepares you to understand. If you want to understand the parables, what should you do? Stay “around” Jesus and accept his teaching. He will reveal to you the relevance of parables in his time according to your need for them. Do the parables of Jesus intrigue you? If so, stay close to him.

I can never come to the parables of Mark 4 without remembering a Bulgarian pastor in the city of Silistra. In the summer of 1992, I met Constantine and taught the scriptures to his small church during a short-term missions trip. One of my companions from our church in the United States was leading a Bible study on the parables of Mark 4 and invited comments from members of the church. Several of them, bless their hearts, offered widely off-the-mark suggestions as to the meaning of the parables. Constantine's comments, however, were always insightful and thought-provoking. He had received no theological training and had almost no access to commentaries. I wondered where this wisdom was coming from. So I asked him. He said that he began most days by getting on his knees, opening his Bible, and praying, “Lord, teach me.” Although I employ—and recommend the use of—commentaries and other scholarly works, they serve no purpose unless we approach the text with a hearing heart. For Constantine, staying around Jesus and accepting the Lord's teaching took him deeper into the mystery of the kingdom of God.

God has preserved for us in the scriptures these world-shaking stories of his kingdom. If you embrace the parables of Jesus, even if your understanding of them is incomplete, then to you—yes, to you—has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God. What a gift!

Explanation of the parable

Jesus asks his disciples and other followers a rhetorical question: “How will you understand all the parables?” He then proceeds to explain the meaning of the parable of the sower. They will understand the parables not only through Jesus' explanation of them but also by understanding the meaning of the parable of the sower. His explanation of this parable, therefore, will help us understand the rest of his parables.

The seed in the parable represents the word. Earlier in the gospel and later in his commentary on Jesus' parables, Mark notes that Jesus was speaking “the word” (Mark 2:2, 3:33). The sower, therefore, is Jesus, or anyone who preaches “the word,” for Jesus commissioned his disciples to preach (Mark 3:14). What then is the word? The word is Jesus' preaching about the arrival of the kingdom of God (Mark 1:15-16). The “word” in Isaiah 55:10-11, a passage that Jesus echoes in the telling of the parable, ultimately concerned the arrival of the kingdom. When Jesus evocatively equates his preaching with the word in Isaiah, he's saying that the long-awaited kingdom of God is here. God is breaking in with his healing, loving rule in the person of the Jesus the Messiah.

The kingdom is not coming as expected, however. It is not coming with guns blazing but with seeds casting. Jesus is more like a farmer than a military leader. Neither is the kingdom being universally embraced in Israel. Those in the know, such as scribes from Jerusalem and even Jesus' own family, are resisting and even opposing the incoming kingdom. The different kinds of ground in the parable represent different kinds of receptivity Jesus' message about the kingdom finds among those who hear it. The parable of the sower functions to vindicate Jesus' unorthodox vision of the kingdom and explain the unexpectedly mixed response within Israel to the arrival of the kingdom.

In the parable, the condition of the ground—the condition of the hearts of those who hear the word—makes all the difference. Three kinds of unreceptive hearts allow various influences to prevent Jesus' preaching about the kingdom to produce spiritually fruitful lives. Satan rules a rival kingdom in opposition to God and plucks the word away. Believing the message of Jesus draws the ire of those with opposing worldviews who prevent the word from taking root in their own hearts. Personal desires in conflict with the kingdom choke the word.

In three “sowings,” the word of the kingdom fails. In a fourth sowing, however, the word succeeds—and succeeds in three ways, canceling out the threefold failure. The people of the fourth sowing, unlike those who succumbed to Satanic, worldly, and fleshly influences, “hear the word and accept it”: they receive it deeply and respond

to it exclusively.

Jesus' explanation encourages his followers to believe in his unorthodox vision of the kingdom even though it is encountering both resistance and opposition. Don't be surprised, the parable says, that the word of the kingdom is causing division in Israel, and know for sure that the word will be effective—remarkably so—with some.

The explanation also imparts a methodology for understanding all the parables of Jesus: hear the word of the kingdom as articulated by Jesus and accept it. The telling of the parable begins and ends with an invitation to listen. The explanation of the parable includes four appearances of the verb “hear” and commends those who “hear the word and accept it.” Receptivity to the words of Jesus increases one's capacity to understand the parables, which convey his revolutionary—and, in many ways, counterintuitive—view of the kingdom.

The reason for hope

The parable of the sower, like the other parables in Mark 4, awakens our dreams for a better world while at the same time redefining them. Although we might want for the instant realization of our dreams, the parable teaches us to wait for God to create what we could not dream. The seeds of God's new world have been sown in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Indeed, we're sowing some ourselves as we proclaim the arrival of God's kingdom and rescue people from the clutches of rival kingdoms. Signs of the new world are sprouting all over the world as men, women, and children embrace the gospel and mission of Jesus Christ. The parable instructs us to adopt the patience and faithfulness of a farmer.

Many in our world—including, perhaps, many people we love—have rejected the gospel. If we would expect a more universal response if in fact the kingdom of God has broken into this world, the parable of the sower redefines our expectations. Jesus' description of resistance to the gospel resonates with our observations. We observe that the gospel seems to be immediately plucked away from some who hear it. We observe that some seemingly embrace the gospel but fall away when hard times come. We observe that some capitulate to anxiety and personal desires and forsake the gospel. The parable instructs us to prepare ourselves for such responses and to believe that God will vindicate the gospel.

If we want to know how we ourselves might guard against responding to the gospel in such ways, the parable would encourage us to keep listening to Jesus. Many find, as they age, that simple answers and formulas that satisfied them earlier in life no longer do the trick. Such has been my experience. However, I have also found the teaching of Jesus, being neither simple nor formulaic, to be inexhaustible. So I keep digging, with the help of a collection of biblical scholars who sharpen my shovel, looking for new treasures not only in the gospels but also in the rest of the scriptures. The kingdom of God is so revolutionary that it is bound to defy simple answers and formulas.

Although we observe that the gospel fails to penetrate the hearts of many in our world, we also observe that some receive the gospel deeply, respond to it exclusively, and bear fruit for the kingdom into their latter years. Because of these men and women, we know that the problem is not with the seed but with the soil. Yes, the word of the kingdom causes division, but it succeeds remarkably with some. The success of the gospel with some, according to the parable, cancels out such resistance. The presence of a remnant of men and women who embrace the gospel—particularly those whose passion for Christ burns into their latter years—serves to encourage us that the gospel will be vindicated.

This is one of the reasons I'm so thankful that Jesus' family in this church includes a strong contingent of spiritual grandparents. They have heard the word and accepted it. Their capacity for embracing truth has expanded with the years. Many of them are the prayer warriors of the church. They have borne fruit thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold. Their resilient and ever-increasing faith, often in the face of loss, failing health, and death, encourages us to believe that the gospel has a glorious future. Because of them, we know we're not just whistling in the dark. How blessed we are to have such men and women in our midst.

The faithful farmer

Like *The Mission*, the parable of the sower gives us a realistic assessment of our world while at the same time inspiring us to hope for something more. In particular, the parable inspires us to believe the gospel and carry out its mission. The seeds we sow for the gospel will bear fruit, if not in this world then in the new world. In fact, they will give birth to a new world. When opposition presses in, when your faith lags, when depression overwhelms you, remember the story of the failing but faithful farmer who realized a bumper crop.

So, beloved, believe the gospel and cast your seeds.

NOTES

¹ *The Mission* (Warner Brothers, 1986).

² *Literary structure of Mark 4:1-34:*

A Introduction: Teaching in parables (1-2)

B Parable about seeds (2-20)

X Parables about lamp and measure (21-25)

B' Parables about seeds (26-32)

A' Summary: Teaching in parables (33-34)

³ *Literary structure of Mark 4:1-20:*

A Teaching: Parable of the sower (1-9)

X Effect parables: revelation and concealment (10-12)

⁴ *However, Jesus warned that someone who “blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness” (Mark 3:29). Some, perhaps among the scribes who accused Jesus of being in league with the devil, may have marked themselves out as permanently unrepentant. For someone who has permanently placed himself outside the kingdom of God, inability to understand or apply the parables would serve to confirm his rejection of God’s forgiveness.*