

New to whole sacred writings situation? 4 versions of the teachings and deeds of Jesus: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, followed by “Acts of the Apostles,” which is an account of how the Jewish Jesus sect spread from Jerusalem throughout Roman Empire by way of synagogues scattered throughout the Empire. Before it morphed into something called Christianity.

Our portion today is from the gospel of Luke. Whoever wrote it also wrote Acts, but neither one identifies its author. Probably, Luke was a companion of Paul, maybe a physician, a Greek-speaking Jew of the first century. Worth noting: Despite how old the NT is, how culturally removed from us, there’s a lot we do know, but there’s also a lot we don’t know, like who exactly wrote the gospels. When you’re trying to decipher what any piece of writing means—the first question you ask is, “Who wrote this?” The fact we’re making educated guesses about such a basic question is telling. I mention this because many have said the meaning of Scripture is clear, plain to the average person, and that Scripture delivers something called “absolute truth” which we can grasp with certainty. I think that has more to do with controlling what a group of people believe, than it is a natural conclusion you’d reach by reading these various writings we call Scripture. Fascinating? intriguing? Yes. But often not clear, which makes the posture of certainty a little foolish. A more modest approach is to look for inspiration in them. Let’s try that today with our reading—expanded from what Lydia read

Hence he said, “To what is the kingdom of God comparable, and what shall I compare it to? It’s comparable to the seed of a mustard plant: a man took the seed and tossed it into his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air found shelter among its branches.” And he spoke once again: “What am I going to compare to the kingdom of God? It is comparable to yeast. A woman took it and hid it in three sata of flour, and waited until the whole lump of dough was risen with the yeast.” (Luke 13:18-21)

In Ancient Near East, everyone lived in a place ruled by a potentate, a king, a warlord. Who that ruler was made a huge difference your life. The ancient Israelites were fond of wondering, “What would it be like to live in a realm under divine influence, rather than the rabble in charge?” That’s the act of a political-cultural-spiritual imagination. Jesus, a teacher in ancient Israel under Roman occupation is weighing in on this question, often with folksy comparisons, called parables—casting light on an unknown thing by comparing it to a known thing.

This pair of parables, a man tossing a seed into a garden that becomes a tree providing shelter for birds, and a woman kneading yeast into a lump of dough to make bread to feed a whole

bunch of people (the lump of dough, a *stada*, was quite large) expresses a very Jewish idea that humans are made for companionship, for partnership with God. And it happens in the everyday

—gardening, making bread. Also, there’s an expansiveness to the good realm of God—it’s not a realm of scarcity but of plenty. Both parables speak of the good realm of God as an emergent, not an imposed phenomenon. But something more like a fermentation process.

I like this picture of a gardener tossing (another translation says “casting” the mustard seed into the garden.) Like these little seeds are so fertile, so eager to get to growing, you can just toss them into the garden, and they find a way to germinate and grow. You can imagine people walking past this garden taking no notice of a little seed laying on the ground as the germination commences—the warmth & moisture of the soil softening the outer casing of the seed, welcoming little tendrils sprouting out, that function like stakes in the corners of a tent, securing the wannabe plant in its location until, over days, weeks, months, it’s forming into a mustard bush that birds make a home in. So it’s an **emergent** process, the good realm of God, and in the early stages, hidden, except to a few who are eagerly awaiting its emergence—the gardener or the person working the leaven into a lump of dough.

Can I make an obvious interpretation? Good things often emerge in this way, over time, how to say it, non-violently. Like puppies, plants, children, like movements to effect social change, and this is what the kingdom of God is like, Jesus is saying. That’s quite a departure from the reality of the Ancient Near East, where one ruler is assassinated, and another takes over and armies impose the ruler’s will on the population.

Also, side bar, can I offer a correction for what I think is a common misleading interpretation of this parable—how it features a woman. Christians, including progressive ones, have a bad habit of making their version of faith look good by making ancient Judaism look bad. So it’s very common to point out how Jesus often features women as the point of comparison with God or God’s good realm. Which is true. But then these interpreters make a rhetorical move to make Jesus look even better, by emphasizing how ancient Judaism was so hard on women. I’ve done this myself. It’s a cheap trick of rhetoric to make your thing look good highlighting the negative things in something that isn’t your thing. In this case, it’s unfair. The Old Testament also features women who are active agents for divine purpose in the world. Sarah is a player, so is Hagar, Rachel. The book of Ruth features a woman and her mother-in-law as its heroes. In the Song of Songs, an erotic love poem, the dominant voice is the woman’s voice, not the man’s voice. Lady Wisdom is a player on the divine playing field.

At same time, the OT shows many signs of having been written in a society ruled by men, favoring men, privileging men. Often men are named when women are not. But the same is true of the New Testament. Yes, Jesus had some women as prominent disciples, but he chose 12 Apostles, all men, as founding figures. [My daughter Amy had a touché moment, talking to someone asserting that the Bible proves only men can be ordained because the 12 Apostles were men. She said, “Yeah, well they were all Jewish too buster—which leaves you out!”]

The Bible is an historically and culturally conditioned book. I experience it as more than that, but it’s not less than that. But every other thing ever written by human beings, has this trait: being culturally and historically conditioned. We are all historically and culturally conditioned. My pre-conscious brain was formed in the 1950’s. My mother couldn’t have a checking account in her own name when I was born. 94% of the world’s wealth was in U.S. hands that year—which meant it was controlled by people with my skin tone and gender. So especially my pre-conscious formation leaks out from time to time as I manifest my male-pattern-maleness, preconsciously formed in the 1950s. But we can also rise above our historical-cultural conditioning. *Those* are my moments of inspiration. Same with the Bible, to find inspiration from it, look for the places, and they are many, when these writings bear witness to something far beyond the cultural-historical conditioning of the writers.

To that end, I’d offer props for this particular parable. If I were to send Jesus a fan email it would say, “Thank you for this parable that speaks to me in my time. Not all of your parables speak to me equally. The ones about Kings doing this and that are harder for me to identify with. But these two that picture the realm of God coming in this emergent, non-violent way, like a germination-fermentation process—this works. I’m inspired.

So let’s draw this together. There is real value in imagining what the world would be like under divine influence, rather than under its current power brokers. If we can’t even imagine something different than what is, how can we begin to make room for it changing? Positive change begins with Imagination which is the power of HOPE. Every movement with the marks of divine energy, has been fueled by HOPE, people imagining a better world that doesn’t exist yet. There was a time even imagining a world without slavery was impossible for most people. We’re still trying to imagine a woman President. *Schitt’s Creek* is an act of the imagination—a town where people find a way love and accept each other, and squabble, and be real people. *Ted Lasso* is imagining a world where macho men can be vulnerable, strong women can support each other. Acts of the imagination are required to bring new things into being.

We use our imagination all the time in the service of fear. I get a little shred of troubling news, hop on the imagination train and within 3 seconds arrive at some vividly imagined catastrophe.

Catastrophic thinking it's called, but it's done in the imagination. Credit the power of our imagination. Impressive! But we can also use imagination in the service of hope. We can imagine our world, on a grand, modest, or micro scale, coming into increased divine influence. Say, a loved one we worry about. We can use our imagination to see them going from bad to worse—their health, addiction, whatever. But we can also imagine them doing better, if only to unexpectedly thrive or be fruitful despite their suffering.

That's where these two little parables shine. They invite us imagine things going better like a man tossing a seed into a garden, that germinates, takes, root, and all the rest—over time, not easily visible in the early stages. Or to imagine things going better like a fermentation process when yeast is folded into a bowl of flour, water, and salt, covered with a cloth, maybe put in a warmer spot and then, rising (from within) until it's ready for baking. What if this really is a trait of the kingdom God—it comes in this emergent, fermentation-like way? If we can imagine it, we'd be on the look-out for it.

Some years ago, I bought a Hyundai. Didn't even know how to pronounce it, Hyundai, Hyundai, didn't know they existed until I did a little research, found out they are less expensive than Toyotas but up and coming. So I got one. Then I saw them everywhere! Here's a Hyundai, there's a Hyundai! What happened? I became attentive to Hyundais.

What I want for myself: As a supplement to my brain's impressive capacity to imagine little seeds of bad news taking root and growing into a catastrophe, I would like to become more attentive to the realm of God emerging like a germinating seed tossed into the soil or like the hidden fermentation process of yeast worked into a lump of dough. The extraordinary emerging from the ordinary. Give me eyes to see that when it's happening.

FOR REFLECTION

Let's do a visualization meditation based on the tree emerging from a germinating seed. Any kind of tree will do, in any kind of setting. Visualizations don't have to be vivid to be helpful. It's just a way to focus our attention, exercise the imagination for a couple of minutes.

Begin if you'd like by taking in a releasing a few nice relaxing deep breaths as you get comfortable where you are sitting. Eyes open or closed, whatever you prefer. Go ahead.

Now if you will, picture a seed in some nice warm, moist soil. Great soil. The seed settles nicely in the soil and it's like watching a time-elapse video as you notice seed starting to germinate, sending tiny roots down into the soil, and little green shoots forming above the soil. Those little green shoots drawing in the energy of the sun, and the roots drawing up the moisture and nutrients from the soil.

Now over the next 30 seconds or so let the time elapse video speed up as you watch that little plant form into a tree, eventually with a trunk and branches and leaves... Any kind of tree you like to imagine forming until it's full grown. Go ahead.

Now picture whatever creatures you like finding a home in among the branches of your tree. Birds, squirrels, maybe a treehouse for kids, whatever. Watch as that tree becomes a little community, a home for many living things over the next half minute. Go ahead.

And now I'll close by reading our portion from Luke 13 one more time: ***Hence he said, "To what is the kingdom of God comparable, and what shall I compare it to? It's comparable to the seed of a mustard plant: a man took the seed and tossed it into his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air found shelter among its branches." And he spoke once again: "What am I going to compare to the kingdom of God? It is comparable to yeast. A woman took it and hid it in three sata of flour, and waited until the whole lump of dough was risen with the yeast."*** (Luke 13:18-21)