

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**June 16, 2024, The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost/11<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time**

Psalm 20, Mark 4:26-34

**MUSTARD SEEDS, ACORNS AND A MAMA LION**

I invite you to take a look at the cover of your bulletin. (see end of sermon) This is a picture that I found over 15 years ago and immediately printed and put on the file cabinet in my office. I see this picture every time I'm sitting at my computer.

This is a picture that both comforts me and makes me laugh at myself at times. To me this is a picture of God's love for us and shows the promises of the life of faith, even and especially when we think we are mighty roaring lions.

No matter how in charge of our lives that we feel,  
no matter how fierce we think we are,  
no matter how much we think we have things figured out,  
no matter how much we want to roar that our beliefs and ideas are the truth,  
behind us sits God like a mama lion watching over us and protecting us.

We are always going to be little baby lions, protected by an oh-so-much-bigger God.

There are other times that I look at this picture and think it also speaks to those times  
We are feeling lost and alone  
When we are crying out for help,  
When we are acting fierce and in control but really feeling quite small,  
And there again, God sits behind us like a mama lion, watching over us and protecting us,  
and understanding what is really happening in a much more complete way than we ever will.

I thought of this picture as I started to spend time with Jesus' parable in Mark. The parable begins with the words: "The kingdom of God is as if....and then tells the story of the farmer sowing seed.

This week one of my favorite authors about Middle Eastern life and Jesus' teachings said that as English speakers when we hear the words "Kingdom of God" we often think of a place. But this author, John Pilch, writes that when Jesus was talking about the kingdom of God, he was meaning the person of God;

who God is and what God does.

Jesus was saying: "This is what happens when God is totally in charge of life."

This is what God's reign looks like in human history.

Pilch, John J., *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle B*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996, p. 97.

Having said this is who God is and what God does, Jesus tells the parable of a farmer sewing the seed into the ground, and then day by day the farmer gets up, and goes to sleep at night, and while he lives his life, the seed sprouts and grows even if the farmer can't explain how it happens.

First there is the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head and then the grain is ready for the harvest.

This is God working in the midst of the harvest.

This is God working out the plans God has for us, for human history, for each of our lives.

I find this image of the Kingdom of God very comforting. Just like the mama lion watching over her cub, our God watches over us. Even when we don't understand what God has planned for our lives, for the future of the Christian Church, for this congregation, for what is going to happen next, God knows how this is working.  
Our God of the harvest knows how things and people and faith grow.

I find this especially comforting in this season of change within Christianity. Many churches like ours can tell of the glory days of the 1950's, '60s and early '70's when the church was full, the Sunday School was overflowing and the church was the center of much of social life and definition within the community.

While we long for those good old days, God is definitely calling us to a new time and season within the Christian Church. We aren't going to go back to those days, and we are trying to find our way forward.

We are in a season where the old ways of doing things are no longer really working, but we are unsure what the new way is going to be.

What this parable invites us to remember is that we are still to plant the seeds of telling the Good News of Jesus' saving love, the seeds of doing mission work here in our community and reaching out into the world with peacemaking and justice, planting the seeds of bringing Christian Education to our children and youth, inside our walls and outside them, and as adults to continue to grow in the life of faith and learning.

And while we, much like the farmer in the parable, don't know how the growth happens, God continues to move people in the life of faith, God continues to call people to love God, their neighbors and themselves, God continues to call us as First Presbyterian Church to "love God, love each other and reach out to people."

I believe that part of being faithful in this season of change within Christianity, is trusting that in the Kingdom of God, the reign of God, God's growing season continues. Our God is in the growing business.

If I didn't think that God, like that mama lion, was watching over us on this journey, understanding all of the growth season, even when we can't always see it, I wouldn't have the courage to walk into my office on Tuesday mornings, or stand up in this pulpit on Sunday mornings. We may not understand the growing season, but we can trust our God of the harvest.

Then Jesus gives us another picture of how God's creating and growth happens, by telling a parable of the mustard seed.

Now I don't know about you, but I have never seen the kind of mustard seed bush that Jesus talks about in this morning's parable.

I know that they grow in the Middle East, and I've read that they grow in northern Africa, so I'll be interested to hear if some of you from Togo have ever seen a mustard seed shrub or tree.

When I think of this parable I like to think of acorns, because it is something that is more familiar. Such a tiny seed can produce oak trees like the giant pin oak tree in the backyard of the church's manse next door. One of the teas I drink has quotes on the tea bag tags. This week there was a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson: "The creation of a thousand forests is in one acorn." This is why I love acorns, they have so much hidden potential inside one tiny seed.

I love that image of both the mustard seed and the acorn being so small but accomplishing such growth. Jesus says that this is what God's kingdom is like. What God does and who God is. Even the smallest of seeds can create more than we can imagine. Large branches, big enough for the birds of the air to make nests in the shade and have a home.

With God's love and guidance, what we are doing in the life of faith can grow bigger than we ever thought possible.

So, what do we do with mama lions and mustard seeds and acorns when we walk out of this sanctuary and into the coming week?

First, we trust that God is watching over us, as we live this life of faith, the Lord of the Harvest, the Mama Lion, is so much bigger than we can even imagine, with more love for each of us and all of us, than we can ever fathom in our tiny little lion cub brains.

Like the cub in the picture,  
we need to remember that even when we think we are roaring and powerful,  
the God who watches over us is--thank God!--the real power in the picture!

And then, trusting in the Mama Lion who is behind us and with us,  
...we plant the seeds,

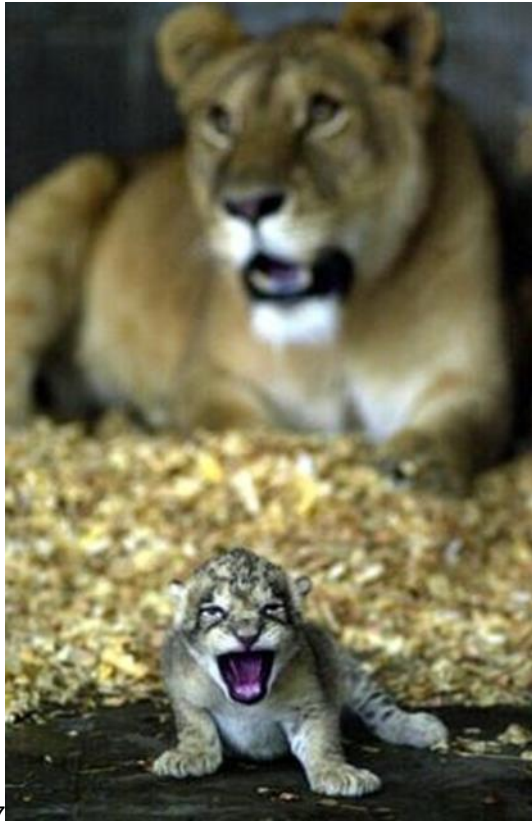
our small acorns of faith,  
of kindness,  
of peacemaking,  
of working for justice,  
of devotion to our God,  
our acorns of seeking to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ as individuals, and as a  
congregation, inviting others to join us,  
we plant our acorns of love that change lives.

We go into this week looking for the places to plant the small acorns we have been given and we each feel called to plant,  
trusting that our God is in the growing business.

God's creations are going to far surpass our understanding and imagination,  
because God knows how plants and people and faith and communities of faith  
grow!

There are birds and people waiting for places to build their nests, so let us look over our  
shoulder and in our hearts and see the God who believes in us and has our back,

Then let us risk our joyful roars of faith and bound into the growing season,  
believing in a good harvest by God's grace, in the Kingdom of God.



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