

## Looking for the Hand of God

Mark 4: 26-34

Ezekiel 17: 22-24

Some of you may have heard this story before about the very, very beginning of my ministry. When I announced to the Clerk of Session at the Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church that I would be seeking Session endorsement of my decision to become a student at Princeton Seminary, his first reaction was: “Wow, Kathy, that’s great! I didn’t know you were a holy roller!”

Whatever gave him that idea? I wasn’t a holy roller and I didn’t want to be. In fact, I shy away from any kind of pressuring evangelism that puts someone on the spot. It’s very uncomfortable and I’m not sure successful. “Are you saved?” is not the demanding question I impose upon people. God’s invitation to salvation is not that heavy handed. God does not require an explosive conversion.

Instead, the hand of God beckons me to introspection and reflection. My faith has grown in more thoughtful, subtle ways. It has grown very much like the way Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven coming about in the parables we read today. These parables have helped me to see where to look for the hand of God in my life – and so perhaps you can look into yours.

**Sometimes we can only see in retrospect how God has been at work in us.** This is especially true when we have suffered in some way and we seek to make sense of that suffering.

The other day I saw an old friend at the dry cleaner. “What’s new?” I asked. “Plenty,” she said. “Tommy is out.” Ah... Her son Tom was out of

jail. He had been found guilty of causing the death of a friend, who overdosed on a drug that Tom had brought to a party. Tom had done his time and was now living at home with restrictions, including a curfew. His mother seemed to think that he had had to pay a terribly high price for his misjudgment and that he was still paying, maybe always would be. I agreed. And then she said, “But does the whole family have to suffer?” And I said, yes, I think so.

What was going through my mind was this: how is God at work in this situation? Through their suffering together, will they learn the deep meaning of family love and what it means to support one another in times of trouble as well as have fun together in good times? What kind of turning point will this experience be for Tom? When they look back on this time, what good will have come from it?

Whether it is suffering or loss or change or achievement, as we are going through an experience, we just have to live it, feel it work on us, go through it. Sometimes we can only see in retrospect how God has been at work. **But then, the person of faith is called upon to do some serious theological reflection, like the seed that comes to fruition.** The parable says that *someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. When the grain is ripe...he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.*

**Looking for the hand of God in our lives, we can also see that God touches the seemingly insignificant and makes it important and glorious.** There are millions and millions of people in this world, millions of lives, millions of souls. Everyday, thousands of people go to work and

come home. Thousands travel, talk on the phone, eat in restaurants, fight in wars. Thousands are born, and thousands are wiped out in a flash by earthquake or hurricane. How can any one person matter?

The Peewee Playcare Nursery School held its graduation ceremony here on Thursday and I had occasion to talk with the director, Jackie Martin. As many of you know, Jackie's husband, Chris, is afflicted with ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease, which has been slowly and steadily progressing. I recalled that the last time I had seen Chris and Jackie was in Morristown Hospital when he was being put on a respirator and Jackie was getting instruction on how to care for Chris on the machine. What an extraordinary task one individual woman was called upon to do!

Each person is significant – to God and to one other – because we do not live and move and have our being on the grand scale. We live as individuals in relationships. The parable says *the kingdom of God is like the mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.*

**Finally, looking for the hand of God in our lives, we see that God suffuses the ordinary with divine meaning.** Ordinary people and ordinary, everyday events can take on an aspect of holiness.

Most of you know that my brother Hobert died suddenly, four weeks ago today. The funeral service was in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, at my niece's church, a Brethren in Christ congregation. Very plain sanctuary, and very contemporary - no hymnals or Bibles on the chairs; no pulpit really; a stage and band set-up and a screen for projecting the songs and hymns. This

kind of church is becoming commonplace. And there was no funeral liturgy really. It was a simple, somber celebration of his life.

My brother was an ordinary person. He was successful in life, the president of a small insurance company in Philadelphia, but nothing outlandish. Not poor, but certainly not rich. Father of two, grandfather of six, enjoying retirement living in Florida.

Both my niece and my nephew wrote tributes and I spoke briefly. Everything we said had to do with the things of ordinary living: picking out Christmas trees with Sandra; discussing cars and computers and cell phones with Wayne; passing judgment on my boyfriends. We spoke of his good character, his wisdom, his dry sense of humor. I read from Philippians, Chapter 4, about honorable and commendable living. And then, abruptly, the ending of my nephew's piece: God called my brother home.

A funeral or memorial service often brings out how a single, ordinary life is really a demonstration of holiness, just as Christ's human life was God incarnate. From the miracle of birth to our going home in death, our lives are a gift from God. Sometimes we remember this and sometimes we don't; and so often we stray from God, who loves us so much.

The parables we read today remind us that the ordinary pattern of growing things – the seed is planted, comes to fruition, is harvested or becomes a mature tree – is the context for God's hand in our lives. The parables themselves – stories using everyday things and events – take on mysterious meaning and convey a divine message when we study them carefully. *With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it.*

**Our lives in Christ constitute the coming of the kingdom of God in the here and now. We are working on it; we are participating in the ministry of Jesus.** Each of us can look back upon our life and notice how the hand of God has touched our ordinary, not insignificant, existence.

And look ahead, too, expecting to find God's presence, knowing God will be there in your every day as you grow in faith and in the sure and certain knowledge of your salvation. Recall the poetic words of God to Ezekiel and think of your life as that young plant that God has taken hold of:

*Thus says the Lord God:  
I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar;  
I will set it out.  
I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young  
twigs;  
I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain.  
On the mountain height...I will plant it,  
in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become  
a noble cedar...  
All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord.  
I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree.  
I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.  
I the Lord have spoken; I will accomplish it.*

Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Rev. Kathryn Henry  
Peapack Reformed Church  
Gladstone, NJ  
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