

January 28: Look Down (*Mark 4:21-34*) – Pastor Heather McDaniel

Today's text is a part of the Narrative Lectionary—a year-long collection of readings that take us from the origins of God's people to the first century world, tracing the theme of "Love in Action" and focusing on the verbs that form the foundation of our faith and life together. Since New Year's Eve, we've been walking through the gospel of Mark, and we've begun to see how Jesus is the embodiment of God's sacrificial love for all the world, and how he calls us to accept, be filled with, and actively live out God's love so that our church, neighborhood, city and country, can be places where that love is seen and felt by everyone.

Faithful God, you are always at work, even when we can't see or feel it. May you give us open eyes to look down and see what you are doing, open ears to hear your words to us today, open hearts to receive your transformative love and hope, and the strength to invest and persevere in your kingdom work of renewal. In the name of your son Jesus, who taught us the parables we're pondering today, Amen.

Almost nineteen years ago, my husband Luke and I moved to the Hopi Indian Reservation in the high desert of northeast Arizona, eager to participate in God's mission of healing and restoring the world. Luke was a newly board-certified family physician who would work at the only health care facility within a 100-mile radius, and I was the full-time parent of a two-year-old and eight months pregnant with his sister. When we moved into our new house, part of a staff compound attached to the health care center, I was great with child and hope and expectations of how we would learn and serve and become part of the Hopi community. We weren't going to be like those families that stayed for a couple years, paid off their school loans, then left. We would put down roots and fully invest ourselves.

What we didn't realize is that the ground would be so hard. Our yard consisted of packed clay with nothing growing in it. When workmen came to install a satellite internet dish, they used a jackhammer to dig. The yard maintenance crew relied on a flamethrower for most of their work – they would just torch the tumbleweed that blew up against the chain link fence that encircled our yard.

But we were determined to make things grow. We (mostly Luke) carted in sand and fertilizer and chiseled out holes and amended the soil and planted and watered and pulled up thousands of baby tumbleweeds and watered some more. And every time something beautiful grew or flowered or survived, it felt like a miracle. But it was such hard, constant work.

And of course it wasn't just gardening that was difficult. We were so isolated, and it was hard to form community. The Hopi Reservation was full of beauty and cultural richness, but also bore intense brokenness, the rotten fruit of centuries of historical trauma, and we felt its weight. After a difficult third pregnancy and a medical emergency at birth, as Luke worked countless extra hours to sustain an understaffed health care center and I struggled to recover and care for three children five and under, we realized that we were not flourishing, we couldn't hold on, and we decided to move here.

Our last days in Hopi were shadowed by a dust storm, and the bleakness reflected the state of my soul. We weren't leaving with a sense of mission well fulfilled – we were escaping. I felt like I had betrayed my ideals and failed in my calling from God. As I took a final look at the yard we invested so much in, I wondered if anything we planted would survive – and in the deepest parts of me, I wondered if there was anything worthwhile and lasting – besides our two daughters, of course – that would grow from our years in the desert.

I think that everyone who gives themselves to the long-term work of change and transformation in the world will struggle with how hard the ground can be – and also, how limited and imperfect we are. There can be long periods of time – sometimes years – where we don't see any big changes, and at times, things seem to get worse. This may have been true for the first readers and hearers of Mark's gospel, who had committed themselves to the good news of Jesus Christ and then found their community senselessly and violently targeted by the Roman emperor Nero. It was certainly true of Jesus' first disciples, who chose to follow him and then discovered that his path wouldn't lead to heroic triumphs and personal glory. The teachings of Jesus that we read today are addressed to those who yearn to see God's kingdom of justice, righteousness, and peace established and revealed here and now, and who long to participate in that work. Jesus invites us to listen, follow, hope, invest, persist, and look down so that we don't miss seeing where God's kingdom has taken root and is growing.

Let me put today's reading in context. The first three chapters of the gospel of Mark unfold at a breakneck pace, as Jesus proclaims God's inbreaking kingdom and demonstrates divine authority by healing, teaching, calling followers, forgiving sins, and driving out the demonic forces of evil and oppression. They're also full of increasing conflict, as Jesus breaches boundaries between insiders and outsiders and lives out God's law with mercy and compassion, challenging long-held, "authoritative" interpretations of Scripture. Prominent religious leaders, who should have been the first to recognize God's presence in their midst, accuse him of being in league with Satan, and even Jesus' own family thinks he's crazy and tries to reign him in.

And then suddenly, Mark pauses the action for an entire chapter of Jesus' public and private teaching, allowing us some time and space to listen to Jesus' words and ponder what he's doing, how and what kind of kingdom he's inaugurating, and why it's so hard for certain people to understand and join in. But Mark 4 is not a chapter of straightforward preaching from Jesus – it's a collection of parables. A parable is a story, a saying, a word picture, or a riddle with a meaning that lies beneath the surface. Parables are not like codes, though, that have one correct solution if you're clever enough to decipher them – sometimes their meaning is ambiguous, or there's more than one interpretation. A parable is meant to unsettle you, to challenge the way you understand life and live it out – and what you bring to it determines what you get out of it. I'm about to share my own reflections and insights after wrestling with and studying the parables we read this morning, but I also invite you to spend time with them, to come to them with openness and willingness to be challenged, and listen and respond to what they say to you.

Our passage this morning begins with a rhetorical question about what to do with a lighted lamp – and just as it would be ridiculous to put it under a bowl or a bed, the good news of God's inbreaking kingdom is not supposed to be hidden away, but to shine forth and be seen. At the same time, though, God's kingdom was not forced onto other people, like the "*Pax Romana*", the "good news" of imperial peace that was maintained with oppressive Roman power that the people of Palestine were compelled to submit to. Perceiving and welcoming God's inbreaking kingdom is voluntary – it means accepting Jesus' invitation to repent and believe and reorient your life to align with God's radical kingdom ethics and values: like loving your enemies; sharing table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners; learning from children, women, outcasts, and outsiders; and laying down power and wealth to become the

servant of all. And for those who clung tenaciously to control, exclusivity, hierarchy, privilege, riches, and self-sufficiency – what Jesus was doing and teaching would remain hidden to them, no matter how much they saw and heard. Nothing would make sense.

“Consider carefully what you hear,” Jesus taught in verse 24. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you – and even more.” Those who had no openness to receive, whose measures were already full of their own sense of rightness, who clung to and protected their old wineskins, who saw Jesus bring healing and freedom to the oppressed and called it the work of Satan – not only would they misunderstand Jesus’ parables, but they wouldn’t be able to see, respond to, and enter into God’s kingdom, or receive the healing and freedom and forgiveness that Jesus came to bring. They would miss it.

But for listeners with open ears and eyes, Jesus gave hints in his parables about where God’s kingdom was to be found – and he didn’t use any of the images of power or splendor or might you might associate with “kingdom”. No – Jesus drew his listeners eyes downward, to the bare ground. God’s kingdom, Jesus said, is like scattered seeds that disappear into the soil. They sprout and begin to grow in the dark, on their own – the farmer has no control over the process and has to trust that growth is happening. And then, all by itself, when the time has come, the soil produces plants which grow and flower and finally produce a fruitful crop. In fact, Jesus added in the final parable, God’s kingdom isn’t just any seed – it’s like an exceptionally tiny and insignificant seed – the mustard seed – which, when planted, grows into the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.

When I preached four weeks ago about Jesus’ baptism in the beginning of Mark’s gospel, I called us to the action verb “look up”, reminding us that there’s always more going on than we can see at ground level. Today, though, I’m going to call us to the action verb “look down”, which I think is the reflexive response to looking up to hear and see God.

To look down is to focus our attention and commit ourselves to where God’s good news is growing in this world’s hard earth, in the midst of chaos and entrenched brokenness, and to be open to surprise and wonder. To look down is to turn our attention away from people or institutions who embody values of power, influence, fame, and winning, who promise quick, triumphant, or tidy solutions to the world’s problems. God works transformation and renewal

through what the world considers weak, foolish, and insignificant – the “smallest of all the seeds on earth”, *and* through a process that is slow and underground, which those blinded by power cannot see or control or stop. We look down because that’s where we find Jesus – on his knees, washing feet, transforming the world through love, service, and self-sacrifice.

To look down is to assume a posture of radical hope and expectation – to believe that God is at work even when we can’t see or feel it, that peace and justice will prevail. We look down and believe that, as we sang this morning, a garden can come up from the dry ground, that God makes beautiful things out of the dust. When we truly commit ourselves to a posture of looking down, though, we don’t just observe what God’s doing – we discover that we are called and empowered to participate in the transformation that comes from the ground up, to be on our knees like Jesus, getting our hands dirty in the soil of this earth that groans for redemption, watching and waiting and longing and trusting and persisting and then rejoicing when new life and beauty bursts forth. And we discover that there is new life growing in us.

But what does it mean, practically, to engage in this discipline of looking down? First, I’d like to invite us to literally look down at the ground. One of the wonderful things about living here is that even in January, there are plants pushing their way up through the soil. In our own yard, we’ve got primroses and snowdrops daring to bloom, with more on the way. I think that the practice of noticing the earth and what’s happening there, of watching spring growth inexorably conquer winter’s barrenness, even when the weather remains cold and grey and dark, can shape us in powerful ways.

Second, looking down means noticing and celebrating how God’s kingdom is pushing up and growing in our own communities and families and neighborhoods and right here in our church. As you look and listen and learn, where and how are people standing up against evil and injustice? Where do you see people who have been repressed or diminished realizing that their particular lives matter, that they are created to take up space and live fully, that their voices are made to be heard? Have you witnessed somebody taking a step towards freedom from addiction or an oppressive situation? When you look around, where do you see people caring for creation or making things beautiful? Have you experienced or observed an act of forgiveness or reconciliation or unexpected kindness? Have you sensed God at work to heal or convict or transform as somebody exercises a gift of music or art or writing

or speaking? Where do you see strangers welcomed in and new families formed, held together by bonds of active love rather than blood? These are all signs of God's kingdom breaking through and growing, and it's happening right here, in this church. In just my short time here so far, I've seen it – and it's powerful to see and name and support where God's light is shining forth. You never know what will grow from your encouragement.

Because of course, just as we understand Jesus' parables best when we live into them, we are called to not just observe but to participate in the work of planting and tending and watering and actively waiting, to invest ourselves and our resources, believing that what we do will make a difference, even if it feels as small as a mustard seed. The theme of this year's Kitsap-wide celebration of the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was his quote: "If I cannot do great things, I can do small things in a great way." This is how God's kingdom grows, from "small things" given in faith and hope and love. It's a slow growth process that we have no control over, and we may never see the fruits of the seeds we plant. Rev. Dr. King didn't get to witness the passing of the 1968 Civil Rights Act – he was murdered the week before, and even as his legacy continues to bear the fruit of justice, there is still so much left to do to bring his dream to reality. And I don't want to gloss over how difficult that can be – to plant and invest and be on our knees when change is slow and the ground is hard, or to believe that our "small things" matter when we know how messed up and broken and weak and prone to failing we are.

And that's why I think that the discipline of looking down includes looking at the parts of our own lives that feel dark or disappointing or full of failure. I believe that God is there, ready to meet us in our brokenness, to grow new life out of pain. It's comforting to me to see how Jesus' disciples struggle and fail, again and again – and yet, Jesus chooses them, loves them, gives his life for them, transforms them, and empowers them. Our own brokenness, failures, and weaknesses do not disqualify us from engaging in God's kingdom work – in fact, growth happens best in ground that's been broken.

Eight years after leaving Hopi, in 2017, Luke and I returned with our children for a visit. As we neared our old house and yard, I wondered whether anything we had planted had survived. And here is God's good gift to me, a parable that God has woven out of my own life – out of the five trees we planted, three were still there. The peach tree in our backyard had spread its branches wide, and even though it was March and it was winter bare, I could imagine that it

provided fruit in season. And the tiny cottonwood we planted in front of our kitchen window – it now towered over the house, and in its branches were the remains of a bird's nest – like the mustard seed in Jesus' story, our tree was providing shade for the birds of the air. When I see those trees, flourishing beyond all hope in the hard soil of the desert, I dare to believe that God is also growing me, with all my weakness and brokenness and past failures, to be able to provide shelter and blessing to others. And I dare to believe that God's kingdom of justice and peace is breaking through, on the Hopi Reservation and in the Middle East and in Ukraine and Sudan and right here in Kitsap, and that one day its flourishing will be clear to all, like a lamp on a stand.

I want to close with this picture, taken during a summer in Hopi after an unusually drenching rainstorm. All at once, seeds that had lain dormant for years came to life, pushed up through the hard ground, and burst into bloom, so that the whole desert turned golden, the same color as flourishing mustard plants. I invite you to receive this parable of hope as I read God's words through the prophet Isaiah. May they draw your eyes down to where God is working – in this world and in you – and embolden you to see, invest, hope, and persevere.

I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys.
I will turn the desert into pools of water, and the parched ground into springs.
I will put in the desert the cedar and the acacia, the myrtle and the olive.
I will set junipers in the wasteland, the fir and the cypress together,
so that people may see and know, may consider and understand,
that the hand of the LORD has done this (Isaiah 41:18-20)

You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. (Isaiah 55:12)