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Pentecost 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“We Know Not How”

Text: Mark 4:26-34; Ezekiel 17:22-24

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

We live in the information age. We know stuff. And we know more stuff now than ever before. Some of it good, some of it bad. Some of it true, some of it false. Some we want to know, and some we wish we didn't know. And what we don't know? It's probably on the internet. We jokingly say: Google knows all . . . but that's probably not so far from the truth. And what we don't know, we *will* know, right? We'll research it, investigate it, discover it, uncover it, science it. We'll get it. Just give us time.

But not the kingdom of God. Jesus tells us today that we do not know how it sprouts and grows. And, we could say, it often defies explanation. It often seems the very opposite of what it should be.

In Jesus' day, those in whom we would have expected the kingdom of God to sprout and grow, the Pharisees and Scribes and Jewish leaders, there it did not. They wanted nothing to do with Jesus and His Word and ways. Yet in those we probably would not expect, the prostitutes, the tax collectors, and those other hardened and willful sinners - those perhaps the farthest from the kingdom of God, in them it does sprout and grow! They rejoice in the kingdom of God.

We expect it to grow because of the big and spectacular - signs, *proof*, that God is real. But after the ten plagues in Egypt and then the dividing of the Red Sea, Israel thanked God by building a golden calf. After God defied the odds and used the prophet Elijah to single-handedly defeat the 450 prophets of Baal, the queen didn't repent but grew even more stubborn; and Elijah ran away and hid in fear. Jesus healed ten lepers - but only one returned to give thanks and worship Him. So the big and spectacular? Meh.

But when little, old, cowardly Jonah preached for the people of the big and powerful, uber-sinful and idolatrous city of Ninveh to repent, *they did!* They listened and they did. And when Peter got up and preached a hard-hitting sermon about how the people of Jerusalem killed Jesus, they didn't chase him out of the city or string him up - 3,000 of them repented and were baptized. It wasn't the big and spectacular, but a little mustard seed of preaching that did it. Who knew?

And then, of course, there was the cross. Build a kingdom by being arrested, tried, mocked, scorned, and killed in the most public and humiliating way then known to man. That's not the script we would write.

But so it is.

The kingdom of God . . . is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.

So we don't know how the kingdom of God sprouts and grows, but we know that it will. Because these words here aren't just a description - they are a promise. A promise that Jesus has been fulfilling from the beginning of time to the end of time. A promise Jesus has been fulfilling when the Church looked big and flourishing, and when it looked dead and gone. A promise Jesus fulfills in those who sometimes seem the least likely and the most against Him. A promise He is fulfilling even now, even here, even in you.

If we look in the wrong place, we may not see it. If we look for the wrong thing we may be disappointed. If we expect it to happen in our time and way, we may question and doubt. But if we rely on His promise - no matter how small and silly, no matter how weak and insignificant, no matter how utterly *opposite* things may look now - the kingdom of God grows.

For the Church's currency is not silver, gold, or pearls, not the big and spectacular, but mustard seeds.

So we splash a little water on someone's head. Big deal. Yes, big deal! For there is Jesus washing away sins, planting Himself in a sinner, and claiming her for His own. A little, watery mustard seed sown in us dried up by sin and death.

And we forgive. Big deal. Yes, big deal! For how often do we hope for forgiveness in this world but don't get it, and yet here Jesus Himself is forgiving you and not counting your sins against you. A little mustard seed of freedom and relief in a world of hardness, grudges, and revenge.

We preach. Big deal. Yes, big deal! When Jesus is preached. When Christ crucified is preached. When the mercy and love of God is preached. A little mustard seed of rest in this self-improvement, you can do it, try harder, survival of the fittest, world.

And we give the Body and Blood of Christ. Big deal. Yes, big deal! Here you do not give a pound of flesh and your blood, sweat, and tears, but receive Jesus', given and shed for you. A little mustard seed of life and hope in a never-satisfied, always demanding more,

world.

These things, these mustard seeds, look about as insignificant and weak as the promise of a son made to 99 year old Abraham, the promise of a kingdom to a nation of slaves, the promise of a son to a virgin, and the promise of life to a dead man laid in a tomb. So, well, I guess those are pretty good mustard seeds after all!

But it wasn't easy. Abraham doubted and tried to take matters into his own hands. Israel lived as slaves for a long time before the Exodus happened. Mary's faith was rewarded with the accusation of adultery. And a large stone rolled in front of a tomb containing the one you hoped would save you, and then sealed, and then guarded by soldiers, seemed pretty hopeless. All those examples - and many more - when it seemed like the mustard seed of the Word is a dud and isn't going to grow or succeed at all.

And yet it did.

And what is it for you? What waiting, what frustration, what doubt, what fear, what odds, what stubbornness, what conflict, what sorrow, what difficulty, what in your life seems dead and buried and hopeless? That makes you think that mustard seed of the Word a dud?

But the kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.

So we don't rely on what we see or what we know - or how we might improve on and do better than God! - we rely on the promise of God. It's His seed, His Word, His gifts, His kingdom, His plants, His children, His harvest, His work. And as He has shown and proved across the centuries and the millennia, He will do it. Sometimes in spite of us. Sometimes after we've messed it up pretty bad. Sometimes when we least expect it. Sometimes how we least expect it. And sometimes where we least expect it.

And those little mustard seeds sown in you here, you sow them, too. In your lives, as you go and take these seeds with you. As you take Jesus with you.

Don't underestimate . . . especially today you fathers . . . don't underestimate when you forgive. When you ask for forgiveness. When you pray with your child at bedtime. When you have a little five minute devotion with your family at the end of a hectic day. When you pray with someone in need. When you speak the truth in love. When you love the loveless, befriend the friendless, visit the lonely, and have mercy on the down and out. When you care for those the world thinks we would be better off without. When you listen to someone who is hurting and confused and give them hope.

When you do these things that to the world - or maybe even to you sometimes - may seem like a waste of time . . . When you do these things that may seem insignificant, irrelevant, and incapable of doing anything useful or great . . . When you do these things that you might even get resistance or opposition for . . . When you . . . well, give Jesus . . . those tiny little mustard seeds may just surprise you and grow into something you do not expect.

And maybe you'll see it, maybe you won't. Maybe no one in this world will know what you've done. Maybe you'll even not know it or forget it yourself. But Jesus knows, and won't forget it. For His kingdom is growing, one sinner at a time. He is growing His kingdom, one sinner at a time. Even using weak and doubting sinners to do it. Like Abraham, Moses, Jonah, Peter, and you.

I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it. That's what the Lord said through the prophet Ezekiel, at one of the worst and hardest-to-believe moments in Israel's history. But He did. He brought Israel back from her captivity, He planted the tree of the cross, and He's been working ever since.

So while we live in the information age, there are still things even Google doesn't know. And won't know. Ever. And, you know, sometimes it's better to not know, but to trust. When your trust is in the Lord.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.