

The Rev. Brandon Ashcraft
The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 6 (Year B)
Mark 4:26-34
Trinity Church in the City of Boston
June 16, 2024

Doom is Not our Destiny

Nuclear annihilation. Climate catastrophe. Biological warfare. These are just a few of the subjects explored in a course at the University of Chicago that endeavors to answer this question: “Are we doomed?” Led by an astrophysicist and a computational scientist, for three hours each week students survey the existential threat posed by such forces as artificial intelligence and infectious diseases. The class I’m describing is the subject of a *New Yorker* article that caught my eye this past week. I just had to know what kind of students choose to immerse themselves in weekly apocalyptic inquiry! I was relieved to hear the journalist describe the students as “buoyant” with “brighter temperaments than [her] own.”¹ I was also encouraged to discover that the cultivation of “radical imagination” is one of the course’s objectives, empowering these students to confront a world filled with seemingly insurmountable obstacles. And I was even more encouraged to learn that many students, in the words of one professor, “seem to have emerged from the class with hope.”²

Whether we realize it or not, we at Trinity Church have something in common with these students. Our setting is a church, and not a classroom. But when we come together, we are also seeking assurance that doomsday is not our destiny, despite all the signs to the contrary. In a world beset by the terror of war, the chaos of acrimonious politics, and the lingering wounds of a global pandemic, we gather in this sacred space week after week to find hope to nourish and sustain us.

After reading that article, I can’t tell you where or in what those students ultimately found hope.

¹ Rivka Galchen, “Are We Doomed? Here’s How to Think about It.” *The New Yorker*, 3 June 2024, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/06/10/are-we-doomed-heres-how-to-think-about-it.

² Marueen Searcy, “Are We Doomed?” *The University of Chicago Magazine*, 1 June 2023, mag.uchicago.edu/science-medicine/are-we-doomed.

I cannot tell you what evidence or data they were able to point to. But as Christians, I know that we point neither to evidence nor to data, but to a *person*.

When Jesus of Nazareth first appeared 2,000 years ago, it was to a people living under the mantle of Roman oppression in a doomsday climate of their own. So when this itinerant Jewish rabbi started preaching about “the Kingdom of God” – an alternative to the kingdom governed by a tyrannical Caesar – they paid attention. If you’ll think back to Advent, you’ll remember that when Jesus made his debut in the opening chapter of Mark’s Gospel, his very first act was to *preach*. “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near,” he proclaimed.³ Four chapters later, Jesus transitions from *preaching* about the Kingdom to *teaching* about the Kingdom. But this teacher doesn’t deliver a theology lecture. No, this teacher chooses to tell stories – enigmatic stories called parables.

When biblical scholars define parables, they often start by telling us what a parable is *not*. Parables are *not* morality tales, like Aesop’s fables. Parables are *not* riddles to be solved. Eugene Petersen tells us that parables demand our participation: “We cannot look at a parable as a spectator and expect to get it,” he says.⁴ My favorite parable scholar, Amy-Jill Levine, advises that instead of considering what parables “mean,” we should consider what parables can “do.”⁵ And what parables do is surprise and disorient us. They confront and disturb us. They demand that we use our imagination.

Parables are Jesus’ artform, and his medium is the everyday stuff in the lives of first century Palestinians. Yeast and dough. Sheep and coins. Seeds, soil and plants. Of the two short parables we

³ Mark 1:15 (NRSV)

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *Tell It Slant a Conversation on the Language of Jesus in His Stories and Prayers* (Chicago: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2012), 59.

⁵ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: Harper One, an Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), 4.

just heard, the one starring the mustard seed is undoubtedly the more familiar, because it appears in all three Synoptic Gospels. But only in Mark's account does Jesus tell the first parable: the Parable of the Seed Growing Secretly. This parable upends everything you thought you knew about gardening, and it disturbs strategic planners, micro-managers, workaholics and control-freaks everywhere; because once the seed is scattered in the ground, the gardener's job is done. There's no watering, fertilizing, pruning or weeding. No attempts to control the process whatsoever. Indeed, the growth happens while the gardener is sleeping! In the end, the seeds produce an impressive yield, but this bounty has very little to do with the gardener. For, as Jesus says, "the earth produces of itself."⁶ The seeds sprout and grow; but the one who scatters? Well, "he knows not how."⁷ I wonder, if we were to use our imaginations and participate in this parable as Peterson suggests, where might we find ourselves in this parable?

In our baptisms, we are called to work for the spread of the Kingdom of God. To use the language of the parable, we are commissioned to scatter seeds of justice, peace and love; but this isn't always easy work. I don't know about you, but when I contemplate our greatest challenges and societal ills – the ones studied back in that Chicago classroom – I can easily get overwhelmed. The sheer scale and magnitude of something like climate change can do that. And once we're overwhelmed, it's a very short distance from action to apathy. From engagement to inertia. But this parable compels us to think differently. This parable invites us to get out of our heads and to think with our hearts. To be at peace with not having all the answers. This parable demands that we surrender control. If we let the parable do its job, it provokes us to practice radical trust. To trust

⁶ Mark 4:28 (NRSV).

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that in God's kingdom, the soil is rich and fertile beyond what our minds can fathom. To trust that, in God's good time, our seeds will indeed sprout and grow, even though we don't or can't know how.

I have been with you only a few short weeks, but let me tell you where I see this parable being lived out at Trinity Church. On a recent Wednesday evening, a handful of faithful parishioners and members of our Creation Care team – folks who care deeply about our fragile earth – gathered for a meeting. But first, they planted a small garden of native plants in a bed near the porch along Clarendon Street. These native plants coevolve with native wildlife, support biodiversity, and help keep the local ecology in balance. Each Friday morning, a group of joyful disciples gather in the kitchen downstairs to make nutritious meals for our neighbors suffering the injustice of food insecurity. Just yesterday, a group of Trinitarians traveled to Malden for a workday with Habitat for Humanity, doing their part to bridge the gap of a system that keeps the dream of homeownership out of reach for far too many. And earlier this month, a brave cohort participated in a training offered by our passionately committed Anti-Racism Team. In shared learning and vulnerable conversations, this group took a faithful step on the path to becoming Beloved Community.

Given the size and scale of these challenges – climate change, hunger, housing insecurity and racism – some might ask: can one garden of native plants really help to save our warming planet? Can a few bag lunches make a dent in the problem of hunger? Does a single Habitat House even move the needle when the entire system is broken from decades of racist, unjust policies? If we believe this parable to be the Word of God, our answer must be: *yes, yes and yes*. Because, my friends, doom is not our destiny. Indeed, we claim another story. A story of a love and grace so profound, it can transform our smallest seed into the greatest of shrubs.

People of Trinity Church in the City of Boston: Will you commit to scattering seeds of love and justice? Will you trust in the mysterious and miraculous richness of the soil? Will you follow

this teller of parables and let his stories transform your heart and minds? May your answer be yes, yes, and yes, until that day the kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.