

**“We Groan”**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday After Pentecost**  
**June 18, 2006**

Texts: Ezekiel 31:1-6, 10-14 / Psalm 92:1-4, 11-14 / 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 / Mark 4:26-34

The Kingdom of God is like...a multi-national corporation...No! The Kingdom of God is like...a Himalayan mountain...No! The Kingdom of God is like...the United Nations...No! The Kingdom of God is like...a mighty Sequoyah tree...No! In the OT, the prophet Ezekiel (17:22-23) had a vision for the nation of Israel,

<sup>22</sup> Thus says the Lord GOD: “I will take also *one* of the highest branches of the high cedar and set *it* out. I will crop off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and will plant *it* on a high and prominent mountain. <sup>23</sup> On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it; and it will bring forth boughs, and bear fruit, and be a majestic cedar. Under it will dwell birds of every sort; in the shadow of its branches they will dwell. <sup>24</sup> And all the trees of the field shall know that I, the LORD, have brought down the high tree and exalted the low tree, dried up the green tree and made the dry tree flourish; I, the LORD, have spoken and have done *it*.”

But, Jesus said, “The Kingdom of God...is like... a grain of mustard seed?! Yet, the mustard seed is one of the smallest of all seeds.

The classic interpretation here is that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, because the Kingdom of God grows from a seemingly infinitesimal faith into a large bush, nearly a tree. This shows that even the smallest of faith can produce great fruit; growth beyond all imagining. And here is where the interpretation of this parable usually ends. But, this morning I want us to consider the focus of this well-known parable, the mustard seed and the plant, a bit further. As one biblical scholar has pointed out,

“The point, in other words, is not just that the mustard plant starts as a proverbially small seed and grows into a shrub of three or four feet, or even higher, it is that it tends to take over where it is not wanted, that it tends to get out of control, and that it tends to attract birds within cultivated areas where they are not particularly desired. And that, said Jesus, was what the Kingdom was like; not like the mighty cedar of Lebanon and not quite like a common weed, [but] like a pungent shrub with dangerous takeover properties. Something you would want in only small and carefully controlled doses. If you could control it” (John Dominic Crossan, 1991).

Our faith, the beginnings of the work we do here at St. John's, the work we have been called to do together, will begin small and with just a few having faith and seeing the vision for this Church. But, as the mustard seed, this simple faith will spread into an uncontrollable weed, "like a pungent shrub with dangerous takeover properties." In the south, we would call this kudzu. A weed that threatens to take over everything. A weed that threatens to take over all our lives. A weed that threatens to make a difference in the community. A weed that has influence beyond these walls. A weed that gets out in the garden of life, the garden of those who are coming to Johns Island, the garden of those who are already here but have not yet committed themselves fully to Jesus Christ. And this weed will seem to be out of control, to have a life of its own, and it will not be managed or controlled. Those of us who, like the birds, will find shelter in its branches will be constantly amazed at the growth and how this small plant seems to take over all those it comes in contact with. At times its growth will seem chaotic.

Have you ever heard of the butterfly effect? Edward Lorenz, a meteorologist in the early 1960s, was running computerized equations to theoretically model and predict weather conditions. Having run a particular sequence, he decided to replicate it. Lorenz reentered the number from his printout, taken half-way through the sequence, and left it to run. What he found upon his return was, contrary to his expectations, these results were radically different from his first outcomes. Lorenz had, in fact, entered not precisely the same number, .506127, but the rounded figure of .506. The slightest change in the starting conditions for the experiment resulted in a vastly different outcome. This is the basic tenet of what is now known as chaos theory.

Further study led Lorenz to present a paper in 1972 entitled, "Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly's Wings in Brazil set off a Tornado in Texas?" The example of such a small thing as the flapping of a butterfly's wings in Brazil creating such a large and distant system as a tornado in Texas illustrates both unpredictability, but also the influence of even the smallest input in a system. What I believe we can learn from this natural case is that our input, your input, the input of each and every person at St. John's will affect how this Church will look in six months and six years. What you do here, what you pray about, what

you study, what ministry you are involved with, those people you bring, will contribute greatly to the Kingdom of God here at St. John's. Each of us here is a butterfly purposely flapping our wings, and only God knows what sort of storm, what sort of uncontrollable weed, what sort of tree, what sort of Church will come from this.

Our reading from 2 Corinthians, chapter 5, says that, as long as we are on this earth, we will "groan" and "sigh." Believe you me, this past week, what with General Convention going on in Columbus, Ohio, there has been ample opportunity for groaning and sighing.

But, this passage does not end there. That is not the lot of Christians. We Christians may groan and sigh in this life, but we also "know" and we are also supposed to evince "good courage."

Let us follow the progression of these verbs in our passage from 2 Corinthians. We groan, first of all, when we put all our faith in "this earthly tent." That can either mean this mortal body, or the institutions of this world, whether they be the Episcopal Church or the Anglican Communion, or even St. John's Episcopal Parish. We groan and we long to put on our heavenly dwelling. And, the text says, until we put on our heavenly dwelling – until we are perfected in death – we will feel as if we are naked.

C.S. Lewis says,

"Most people, if they had really learned to look into their hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise. The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love, or first think of some foreign country, or first take up some subject that excites us, are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning, can really satisfy... There was something we grasped at, in that first moment of longing, which just fades away in the reality..."

"The Christian says, 'Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or

mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others to do the same” (C.S. Lewis, 1943, *Mere Christianity*, p. 106)

We groan because we are continuously searching, pining, for that other country...the country where Christ is sovereign, where goodness and mercy are foremost. But, we can only approximate that “other country” – Heaven – in this life. We can only approximate it by cooperating with God in building the Kingdom of God here in some small way at St. John’s. And we can only do that if this Church is open to all, seeks to bring all, searches out the lost, to be brought here so that Christ can make them fully human.

Then, as we desire to bring the Kingdom of God to all here on Johns Island, we will know, as those we bring here will also know that “while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. And finally, knowing all this, we will be “of good courage.”

How do we approximate Heaven here at St. John’s? How do we bring the Kingdom of God here, in some small way, to Johns Island? First, we think outside ourselves. We pray for the lost who will be coming to Johns and Wadmalaw Islands. We pray for opportunities to be inconvenienced for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Second, we prepare for the lost who will be coming through prayer, through fellowship, and through the study of God’s Word. A good start will be if you get involved this Fall with one of the small groups that will be studying *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Group up with some friends who can keep you accountable before God.

Third, we make ourselves available to be used by God here at St. John’s. You will begin to ask yourself these questions: What are my gifts? Where can I be used of God? To paraphrase John F. Kennedy’s inaugural challenge, “Ask not what your Church can do for you, but what you can do for your Church.”

And how will we know the Kingdom of God is here at St. John’s? What are the evidences that the Kingdom of God is here, or will be here, at St. John’s? Our psalm says that we will “flourish like a palm tree, and shall spread abroad like a cedar of Lebanon...[we] shall bear fruit [even] in old age ” In other words, we will be making a difference in the

community around us. Our influence, and thus the influence of Jesus Christ, will spread far and wide. Not to glorify us, but to glorify the God we worship. But, also, because the Kingdom of God is like an uncontrollable weed, like kudzu, things will sometimes seem chaotic here at St. John's, out of control. Because, in truth, **we** are not in control, God is.

“Jesus said, ... [The Kingdom of God] is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all 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.” The Kingdom of God begins with a butterfly flapping its wings. But it builds into an uncontrollable storm. Correction: a storm that only God can control. But, be of good courage. Our purpose is only to flap our wings...to do the work each of us is called to do...and then hang on for the ride of a lifetime. *Amen.*