

Message – Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church
June 23, 2024 – Pastor Karen Andres
Scripture: I Sam. 17:4-11, 31-32, 37; Mark 4:26-34
Title: Hidden yet Revealed

There is a phrase spoken by Franciscan priest and scholar Richard Rohr who said: “God always and forever comes as one who is totally hidden and yet perfectly revealed in the same moment or event.” Rohr explains that the revelation of God is always possible, although not forced on us, and we can choose to **not** see it if we don’t want to. Revelations can lead to transformation.

But what is great about reading scripture is that we are invited into the tension and journey of human beings and we see a history of what happens when humans meet the Divine.

Sometimes they avoid and deny Transcendence. These individual stories are part of a larger story of the forming of God’s people. And they mirror our own patterns of our faith journeys. And in that sense, the Bible reveals patterns of truth that become explicit in Jesus’ teachings.

I don’t know about you, but I often take one step forward and two steps back in my faith journey. Sometimes it is easy to get discouraged with myself and doubtful about what God is doing in the world. How does growth happen as I seek to be a more whole person or transformed in my faith? Certainly in our American culture we are fascinated with or are even obsessed with people who have fame, or those who made millions overnight, or those with mansions in Hollywood. I am amazed at how many times when my Apple phone pings, there is an update about a Hollywood star, giving a tour of their multi-million dollar home or about relationships they are having. We sometimes label these people as superheroes because they represent the American dream of what it means to be successful. I wonder why I need to know that and how does it make me a more whole person. Someone from Apple News thought it was important for the whole world to know.

But I suppose this is nothing new. The Philistines certainly had their superhero, a champion they called him. When we hear the story of David and Goliath, it's like something out of a Disney superhero movie. Here is this giant of a man (8 or 9 feet tall), which the writer describes in great detail, coming to the Israelites again and again over a span of 40 years. He had a helmet of bronze, very heavy armor from head to toe, a javelin, a spear made of iron and a shield. He was quite intimidating and challenged them to provide someone who could fight him. Talk about your bully! The Israelites were terrified and ran away. They didn't know what to do and finally decided that whoever kills him will receive the king's daughter (Michal – Me ha) and be free from then on. Who is going to fight Goliath? Jesse's older sons were out on the battlefield but they didn't volunteer for the job. David was the least likely to be the one chosen. He was the youngest, the smallest, and had the job of tending sheep in Bethlehem while also taking food to his brothers on the front line. That's when he volunteered to confront Goliath and he seems assured that it was because of God that he would be victorious.

Now it may be hard for us to think that God would condone David's actions to kill or cut off Goliath's head, as he did later. But it wasn't unusual for those who were victorious in war to bring the spoils back with them. But the one thing that I find interesting in this story is that David did not allow himself or others to fight on the same terms as the Philistines. But rather noted that God does not come with "sword and spear." God does not come with big armies and armor but rather with a small shepherd boy who recognizes the one God of Israel.

Why is it that only David seems to have this revelation about the one God? Was he paying attention in SS or at least to what his ancestors or teachers had said. How is it that he was able to recognize the God of peace and trust God to take care of things? Why weren't Jesse or Saul

depending or acknowledging this one God as David had? I don't know if we know the answer to that. And, as we know, later on Saul became angry at David's success and sought to kill him. But Michal, who did become David's wife, helped David escape from Saul.

When we put this story in the bigger story of God's strategy for change and growth, it is very different from what humans might expect or even want. We are often impressed by things and people that are big, showy, and heroic characters. But apparently, God is not because change happens in a different way according to scripture. In Jesus' parable of the mustard seed we begin to understand just how growth happens. Certainly Jesus would have been aware of the words of Ezekiel which mirrors this parable. In Ezekiel we read that God will take a sprig from the top of the large cedar tree (the large trees in Lebanon) and plant it on the mountain. There it will produce and bear fruit and every kind of bird will live in the shade of its branches. He brings low the high tree and makes high the low tree. Growth seems to come from the bottom up.

This became clear to me when I was a chaplain at PV and worked in the addiction unit. I loved working with people who had addictions because they knew that the first step to transformation is knowing that you are powerless. That is, in fact, the first step of the 12-step program. And if they failed to recognize that, they would often leave the program but return to try again. Because if you don't realize that you are powerless and you try to overcome the addiction with pure willpower, it's still about you. Powerless means you have to do the slow work of perseverance and recognizing that growth comes from a higher power if you do pay attention and work on the issues that are really causing the addiction. I think that is something

we can all work on. We are all addicted to something even though it may not be visible to the outside world.

And the way Jesus describes the growth indicates a slow process. In verse 28, we read that first the stalk comes, then the head, then the full grain in the head. This is not something that happens overnight. And sometimes we don't even know it's happening.

I thought about this slow process last March when I participated in the Swiss Volhynian play at Eden Church. In one of the scenes, the women were quilting and discussing how to be in the world. They were saying that we don't want to bring attention to ourselves in the way we dress, the cars we drive, and the language we speak. One woman made a statement that brought a lot of laughs in the audience. That statement came after someone mentioned that the children were still attending German school in the summer. The statement was "we have to keep teaching German to our children because that's the only language God understands." We laugh about that now and I wonder what will we be laughing about in the next 20 or 50 or 150 years? Will we think it was ridiculous that we sometimes argued over worship styles or that we didn't want to welcome certain people into the church, or that it took so long for women to be accepted over the pulpit? I don't know. But hopefully we can be patient with ourselves and others when things move along slowly. I am encouraged that God works through imperfect people like David, a small sprout, to bring about the revelation of the kingdom of God. Perhaps every generation has a new revelation of God.

So, how does the mustard seed story relate to us today? The end of the parable speaks of the fruitfulness of the seed – the large branches which provide shade for the birds to nest. But here is the clincher. This happens because it is God who brings the growth. We tend to the

seeds we plant, but God brings the growth. By tending, I mean we are in the process of becoming fully human. In the book called "An Altar in the World," Barbara Brown Taylor says this, "To become fully human means learning to turn my gratitude for being alive into some concrete common good." Brown goes on to say that that's our vocation because God is revealed in humankind but also in human being. God was known in Jesus, who was both fully human and divine and we get to see his full humanity on display in the way he honored the poor, confronted the powerful, fed, healed, and freed people. Did you ever notice how Jesus took the ordinary things of life to reveal the kingdom to us. They are only hidden because we are not looking for them. When people wanted to know the truth about God, Jesus often responded by saying "wash feet, give your stuff away, share your food, pray for your enemies, be the first to say 'I'm sorry.'" These are the seeds that we plant to help bring the kingdom of God to those we meet in the world. The whole world is God's house and we are all guests here. Therefore, we treat all of creation with love and respect and plant seeds of love, joy, and peace, mercy and grace. Maybe you think your life is insignificant. Becoming fully human is a vocation in itself. God can choose any one of us to reveal the kingdom.

(Story of woman who took her life by suicide is published in the book *Fifty Shades of Grace*.)

God's kingdom is not hidden to any of us if we open up our hearts and ask how we can plant seeds so that God's kingdom can be revealed for all the world to see. May it be so. Amen