



**ZUMBRO**  
LUTHERAN CHURCH

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*Sermon Series: Following Jesus to Surprising Places*  
Jesus Teaches in Stories  
Pastor Shelley Cunningham

**Mark 4:1-34 NRSV**

Again he began to teach beside the lake. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the lake and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the lake on the land. 2He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 3"Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. 6And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. 7Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. 8Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." 9And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

10When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. 11And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; 12in order that 'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.' "

13 And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? 14The sower sows the word. 15These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. 16And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. 17But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. 18And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, 19but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. 20And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."

21 He said to them, "Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? 22For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. 23Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" 24And he said to them, "Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. 25For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

26 He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, 27and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. 28The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. 29But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

30He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? 31It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 32yet 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."

33With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; 34he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.



I want to begin today's sermon with the four magic words: *once upon a time ...*

*Once upon a time there was a wise teacher. But though everywhere he went crowds of people would gather to listen to his wisdom, the teacher was troubled. He knew that many were curious to hear his words, but uninterested in changing their ways. He knew others would be unable to comprehend what he was saying, even though they desperately needed to hear it. He even knew some were looking to use his words against him. And so he gave the people exactly what they wanted. And no one went away disappointed.*

Once upon a time .... Those magic words alert us that there's a story coming. We might sit up a little straighter, eager to hear a tale of adventure. Or we might relax into our seats, ready to be entertained. Stories make us take notice. They capture our imagination and expand our perspective. They're powerful, and fun, and unexpected. And a good storyteller knows they are most effective when there's room for the listener to find themselves in the story. In a way, they become the story.

Our journey through Mark - who's a masterful storyteller in his own right - has been unfolding rapidly. There's a lot of action, a sense of urgency as Mark introduces us to this rabbi from Galilee who's been sparking a lot of curiosity. And in today's chapter we see that Jesus himself understands the power of story. The crowds have been swelling rapidly. Word has spread. Interest is piqued. As Jesus stands in a rickety boat a few yards offshore, taking advantage of the natural amphitheater created by the rising foothills surrounding the lake, he has to decide what he is going to say. What did these people come to hear?

Notice that Jesus doesn't pick up a scroll and start reinterpreting scripture. He's not in the synagogue, where conversations about the holy scriptures would be expected. Instead, he tells them a story - a specific kind of story called a parable. A hallmark of a parable is that it has a hidden message. Parables rarely mean what they appear on the surface. Which means, of course, that countless words have been devoted to interpreting what they stand for. That's part of the fun, isn't it: trying to get inside the storyteller's head.

That's also the pitfall. Because contrary to what you might think - or might have had steeped into your bones through years of bible study or listening to sermons or reading books by commentators much wiser than I - there is no one right way to interpret a parable. Now I can hear you saying, "but wait - doesn't he explain to the disciples what he means?" Sometimes. And sometimes we're even lucky enough to overhear it in the text. But even then, we're not in Jesus' head. We don't know why he's telling these stories, or who the most important character is, or how we're supposed to apply them to our lives.





Which makes me wonder: What if having his listeners be ‘right’ when hearing these stories is not what Jesus is after. Maybe what Jesus wants is for us to wrestle, to wonder, to trust.

After all, one of the big subthemes in Mark is that Jesus has something to hide. He’s been clear about not wanting people to talk about who he is or what he has done. We don’t know why Jesus is trying to keep things quiet. But we do know that the message he’s sending the people is not what they expect to hear.

Professor Shauna Hannan likes to read scripture using a method she calls, “I wonder ... I notice ...” It’s pretty simple, really. As you go through a passage, pay attention to those observations and questions that bubble up. Is there a phrase that strikes you? Can you put yourself in the action as if you were hearing the words for the first time? I envision the crowds scattering at the end of the day, beginning the walk back home, trying to unravel what they’d heard. What do you think he meant? What is this kingdom of God he’s talking about? What does it have to do with harvesting? Who is that foolish farmer who wastes his seed scattering it on the path?

Even as these questions and observations arise, though, we must be careful. All too often we hear what we want to hear. We aren’t always comfortable living with ambiguity. We all overlay our expectation of who Jesus is and sometimes these expectations can close us off to hearing and honoring the expectations and experiences of others.

But if we can settle in, and set aside our own lenses and biases, and open our hearts to receive the word ... well, we just might be surprised by what Jesus is saying to us today.

Because once upon a time, the Prophet Isaiah shared this promise of God:  
*As the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I have sent it.*

Amen.

