

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.” “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.” (Matthew 13:31-33)

God’s presence in the world seems small, like a grain of mustard seed, and it is invisible, like yeast in a batch of dough. But God’s presence in the world will leave no part of earth unaffected, and it will produce something so big that whole nations can make their nests in its branches.

Small and Hidden

God’s hidden way of working in the world contradicts the way we expect an all wise, all-powerful God to work. For example, He doesn’t answer your prayer. He allows the wicked to prosper. He doesn’t step in to stop the savagery people do to each other. We need to look more closely at the hidden way God works in the world.

First, imagine yourself in the Galilean hamlet of Capernaum one memorable day, when **the whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons.** The place was in an uproar of joy and hope, because at their doorstep a Man appeared, who could put right the nagging failures of body and mind. And what did He do? **He would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.** (Mark 1:32) Why would He not want people to know who He was?

Now, place yourself in a crowd the day a leper **came to him and begged him on his knees, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.” Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said, “Be clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured.** The next words out of Jesus’ mouth were: **“See that you don’t tell this to anyone.”** Why not? It’s almost cruel, and in any case, how could the man be silent? People would ask, “What happened to you?” Why the reticence of the Lord about spreading good news?

Some time later at a watershed moment in Jesus’ relationship with His inner circle of disciples, He asked them, **“Who do people say I am?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others one of the prophets.” “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”** (Mark 8:27-29) Bingo! **“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.”** (Matthew 13:17) Then, contrary to everything that seemed natural and right, **Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.** (Mark 8:30) Why not? What’s going on here?

God hides Himself in other ways. In particular He hides Himself in weakness. The Apostle Paul said one time that God gave him **a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”** (2 Corinthians 12:7-9) Paul went on to say, **For when I am weak, then I am strong.** (2 Corinthians 12:10)

God never hid Himself so well as He did on Good Friday. When Jesus first predicted His death at the hands of the authorities, Peter, who had just confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, **took him aside and began to rebuke him.** (Mark 8:32) “What kind of

defeatist talk is that? If you are the Messiah, you are going to put things right, not get yourself killed. Right?

The Jewish people of Jesus' generation expected their Messiah to be a man of power. He would get things done. Crucifixion was the guarantee that Jesus was no Messiah. He was a fraud. He was a pretender. The Gentiles of Jesus' day expected a Savior of the world to be wise. Crucifixion as the way of salvation was the most foolish thing they ever heard, and they would be fools to follow Him. The Apostle Paul caught the hidden meaning of the cross in one of the greatest lines he ever wrote: **The foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.** (1 Corinthians 1:25)

Of course, we know this, or we think we know this. We are beneficiaries of the blessed monotony of grace. Week after week, for some of us day after day, we hear the message and memorize the message that **God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him might not perish but have everlasting life.** (John 3:16) Such familiarity can blunt the reality of Jesus' fourth word from the cross: **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"** (Mark 15:34)

But not for long! Sooner or later for most of us a day comes, when you join the ranks of the poor, the suffering, the disadvantaged, the underdogs, people who just had the rug pulled out from under them, people who have come down in the world and are feeling their loss. God's absence from your pain becomes very personal, and you bellow, bargain, and beg for God to make Himself known, and on the other end of the line there is silence. You begin to taste the abandonment of Christ on the cross. The hiddenness of God is no longer a theory but a searing reality in your body and mind.

Freedom

God's way of working in the world contradicts the way we expect an all-wise, all-powerful God to work. He doesn't answer your prayer. He allows the wicked to prosper. He doesn't step in to stop the savagery that people do to each other. He refuses to give you unshakable evidence that your faith is true. Really, God's reticence is astonishing. You would think He would defend His honor when unbelievers blaspheme Him. You'd think He would reassure His people in the face of such evil.

Let's consider two examples of His disturbing reticence. I don't know if anyone under 50 knows much about Sigmund Freud. He was the father of Psychoanalysis. More than that, he and two other men, Karl Marx and Charles Darwin, did more than any others to shape the culture and political experience of Western Civilization for the past 150 years. Freud was an atheist, and he said this about all religion: "The whole thing is so patently infantile, so foreign to reality, that to anyone with a friendly attitude to humanity it is painful to think that the great majority of mortals will never be able to rise above this view of life." (Quoted in Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind*, 127) That is not science. That is smug wish fulfillment, and it is foreign to reality.

Steven Pinker is a distinguished professor of psychology at Harvard and a determined atheist. He said this about all religion: "Religion is a desperate measure that people resort to when the stakes are high and they have exhausted the usual techniques for the causation of success." (Ibid, 128) That is not science. It strikes me that Professor Pinker's atheism is itself "a desperate measure that people resort to when the stakes are high and they have exhausted the usual techniques for the causation of success."

It would be easy to find 100 other quotations like those. They express the narrative that informs secular universities, the arts, and the political structures of Western nations. Why doesn't God stop it?

We are approaching the second anniversary of the massacre of the children in Newtown, CT. Massacres like that have happened a lot since Columbine High School in 1999, and every time it happens there is this anguished cry: "If there is a good God in heaven, why didn't He stop it?" A few people take the giant leap of saying, "If God is supposed to be all powerful and compassionate and didn't prevent what happened to those children, then I don't believe in God. Such a God would be a monster."


It is possible to say that, but it raises a disturbing question. If there is no God, whom do you see about what happened in Newtown, CT, and about all its grief, anger, and confusion, and about all the other senseless human violence, and about the impersonal violence of earthquake, hurricane, tornado, and fire? Let's push the envelope further. You wanted God to stop the massacre in CT. Is there anywhere else you would like Him to stop it? Are some massacres better than others, and they don't have to be stopped? How would you counsel God?

The bind we are in is even worse. We Americans speak pious platitudes about freedom. If God stopped each tragedy before it happened, what would His intervention do to human freedom? Either we are free or we aren't. If we are, then we are free to do both unimaginable good and unimaginable evil and everything in between. If we don't like that, then we don't like freedom. Maybe we would prefer some form of servitude. And in the agonies of freedom, on the other end of the line there is the silence of heaven.

The Kingdom

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches." "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."

A parable is a word picture that teaches us to spot God's presence in the world. Mustard seed and yeast teach us that His presence will never be obvious. God's presence in the world always seems small, like a grain of mustard seed. God's presence is always invisible, like yeast in a batch of dough. But God's presence in the world will leave no part of earth unaffected, and it will produce something so big that whole nations can make their nest in its branches. God has left a calling card that indicates how big and pervasive His presence in the world is, and if we have eyes to see it we will say, "There is the kingdom. God is present. How did we miss Him?" His calling card is the Church.

Here is one example. I want to put an Arabic letter on the screen for you: . This is the letter *nuun*. It sounds like our letter N. It is the first letter in the word *nasrani*. That is the Arabic word for Christians. Now, I want to show you a photograph from Mosul, Iraq. (See end of sermon.) That is not a smiley face. The Arabic letter has been painted on the house of an Iraqi Christian. The Muslim Jihadists whom we know as ISIS will require people in that house to convert to Islam or pay a religious tax or die. Tens of thousands of Iraqi Christians have fled for their lives. ISIS fighters have crucified some of them in a cruel mockery of our Christian faith and beheaded others. We know next to

nothing else about those Iraqi Christians, but they have chosen to be hounded out of hearth and home rather than deny the faith.

They have at last come to the world's attention. I want to show you a Twitter address: #WeAreN. It means "We are Nasrani." "We are Christians." It is a symbol of solidarity. At a speech by a Syrian Christian Bishop young Muslim men stood and shouted, "We are Iraqis. We are Christians." It was their dramatic way of saying that many Muslims reject the violence of ISIS.

There is a deeper meaning here. The second century Church Father, Tertullian, once made a dramatic statement: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Efforts to kill the Church, like efforts to kill her Lord and Savior, result in the spread of the faith men wish to destroy. The suffering Christians in Iraq are bringing the world's attention to the suffering Christians of Syria, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. Jesus is once again on the global grapevine. The power of the mustard seed is on display. The leaven in the batch of dough shows its global reach.

And there is more. The Apostle Paul after four years of unjust imprisonment wrote this to the Church in Philippi from his Roman prison: **Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.** (Philippians 1:13) Will the suffering of the Church in Iraq stir Christians in North America and Europe to new levels of devotion to Christ and to each other? Will their willingness to suffer and die rather than deny the faith challenge our sometimes half-hearted devotion to the Lord?

Take Away

Surely, something is amiss, when brothers and sisters in Iraq are being displaced, beheaded, and crucified, and we begrudge spending two hours together on Sunday morning, or can't get out of bed to get here at all. Their pain may be God's gift to the whole Church to remind us how precious our faith in Christ is. Their chains may be God's way of reminding us especially that our freedom of worship can easily deteriorate into a freedom not to worship.

It has not been granted to us, as it has been granted to Iraqi Christians, **on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him.** (Philippians 1:29) Instead, it has been granted to us Christians in the West to live out our faith in a culture that bombards us every day with the seductive message: "It's okay to do anything you can get away with." Our suffering brothers and sisters in Iraq strengthen our resolve to resist our trendy self-indulgence.

By God's grace I would be the voice of those Iraqi Christians saying to us, **"Deny yourself, take up your cross daily and follow Christ."** (Luke 9:23) As a simple act of solidarity you might join the protest against ISIS on Twitter and Facebook at: #WeAreN. At a more profound level, rededicate yourself to becoming a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ – willing to say to people around you that you are a Christian like the Christians of Iraq, willing to make sacrifices to make your faith in Jesus a more serious matter than it now is, and more willing to build at BVBC a community of faith, who seek to glorify God in all we do.

If you are willing to do any or all those actions, come stand with me here before God and the congregation. If you can't easily walk to the front, or if there is no room at the front, just stand where you are. We will sing while you come, and then we will pray.



<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/july-web-only/mosul-christian-thanks-for-changing-your-wearen-photo.html>

Bonus: Crocuses in Springtime

In Caracas, Venezuela you will find a 45-story building called the Tower of David. Construction began in the early '90s. The, the Venezuelan economy collapsed, and the building developer died. Construction stopped. Caracas had a 45-story shell of a building with one entrance, no elevators, and no plans for completion.

An amazing thing has happened in the intervening years. The poor of Caracas began to move into the Tower of David. 3000 people live there today, and they have all kinds of microbusinesses, services, and guess what else? Churches.

(http://www.ted.com/talks/iwan_baan Ingenious_homes_in_unexpected_places)

Let's go from Caracas to Shanghai. "It would be harder to find a better cross-section of the 'new China' than the people gathered in the sitting room of this comfortable apartment in one of Shanghai's gated communities. The host for the day, Wang, is – right down to the BlackBerry on his belt – a prosperous, bespectacled management consultant, who once worked for Intel. The guests, sitting on sofas and chairs brought in from the kitchen, or perched on the floor, include a pair of biotechnologists, a Chinese American doctor from Los Angeles, a prominent academic, a manager from a state-owned business, two ballet dancers and several successful entrepreneurs. A laptop adorns the coffee table, BMWs are parked in front of the building and advertisements for jewelry decorate the elevator. ...

"It is time for the real business: Romans 1:18-32. The congregation reads the text together from heavily annotated Bibles. Then the discussion, led by Wang, begins. It lasts for almost two and a half hours." (John Micklethwaite & Adrian Woodridge, *God Is Back*, 1-2)

The Church rises in the slums of Caracas and in the upscale condos of Shanghai. The royal family of Saudi Arabia and the dictator of North Korea can't stop it. There are more Christians in Africa, south of the Sahara Desert, than there are people in the United

States. Even we have no idea of the energy within the American church. The Church is not shrinking; it is expanding. The mustard seed and yeast are doing their work. The Church in all her multicolored diversity is the crocus that heralds the kingdom to come.

Take Away

The more chaotic, uncertain and dangerous the world becomes, and the less the Church can count on the government to give it special favors, the more our eyes will be opened to the kingdom of heaven, which is at work silently, invisibly within the human family that now numbers more than 7 billion people.

Brandywine Valley Baptist Church is the only expression of God's power we can do anything about. Here is one action you can take. **Be patient, bearing with one another in love.** (Ephesians 4:2) Who at BVBC is your pain in the neck? Can you bear the pain they inflict without getting upset and angry? Can you bless them, pray for them, and do good to them? That's how we bear credible witness to the reality of our reticent God.