

Surprised by the Workings of God
Sermon for the 2nd Sunday before Lent
Sermon Text: Mark 4:26-29



And He said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. ²⁷ He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. ²⁸ The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. ²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

When God works with us or speaks to us, a miracle happens that we can marvel at, pray about, and rejoice in. We can even stand on our head or do many other things. However, there are also times in which I understand nothing of God's Word, I feel no emotional involvement, and I feel like I'm talking to myself when I pray. God is there. He is there even when we can't feel or notice anything about Him. There's one thing we can't do though – we can't control God, not with our mind nor by any other methods. Nor can we pack experiences with God into a box and place it in a museum. God remains hidden, mysterious, and foreign to us. And everything that God does with us and to us must remain mysterious and unattainable. It is good that we can't grasp God. It is good that we can't find a switch in our brains to trigger experiences of God at the touch of a button. It's good this way! We should really leave God alone in His work with us because otherwise, everything that God does with us and to us could be manipulated by us. We would then confuse human feelings with God's spirit which could lead to the possibility of us influencing other people or abusing His power. We would then succumb to the temptation of wanting to be God ourselves. In the parable Jesus tells us about the sown seeds, He wants to draw attention to this mysterious work of God. In fact, Jesus wants nothing more than a complete change of perspective – away from ourselves and towards God. With this, He brings us to the starting point of the field in which the seeds grow without any help from us. We must know from the beginning that this parable has a completely different effect on us in these present days as opposed to the people from Biblical times. In the ancient world, people were still amazed at the seeds under the earth. People knew about the seeds buried in the darkness and looked up to thank God. We modern people look at the same field and look downwards. These days, we not only know how the seed grows in secret, we can also influence such growth. Yet that shouldn't prevent us from marveling at God. Scientific advances in particular should make us marvel even more at God's fingerprint in nature. And if we know about this hidden action of God, we can go about our work without stress, nervousness, and fear, just as the farmer does. The farmer goes out, sows the seeds, then goes about his other business. Sometimes nothing happens for days or even weeks. The farmer doesn't run after the seeds, mustn't stand next to them and watch how the seed grows, nor does he have to coach the seeds on how to grow. The farmer knows that such help can have catastrophic consequences. There is nothing for him to do other than to trust the seed to grow in the soil on its own. Many generations of experience showed him that he can calmly count on the growth. What Jesus wants to tell us here is plain and simple: we can and should add nothing to God's kingdom. The parable Jesus tells us is intended to prevent us from making mistakes. On the one hand, it wants to protect us from more impatient nervousness and on the other hand from resignation, tiredness, and hopelessness. The parable calls for nothing less from us than that we adopt a completely different perspective than the one we have now – looking away from ourselves and towards God. He wants us to follow in His footsteps in wonder and adoration. He wants us to ponder God's hidden ways in amazement even when these ways are not within our grasp, or we see nothing. In the world in which Jesus lived back then, there were enough people who wanted to help the kingdom of God. For one thing, the Zealots wanted to establish God's kingdom by force. The Pharisees wanted to establish God's kingdom with a series of good works. In the background was the question: how can God's kingdom become more effective in this world? This question is not unfamiliar to us these days. Just like these people, we are faced with the many questions and disappointments of our time and do not know what to do next. We also ask about the effectiveness of God in life. We look at the numerous places in our world where relationships are broken, where people self-destruct and kill, where war prevails, and ask: "what is God doing" or "where is God" or "we've prayed so often for the people in Iran and Ukraine, why then aren't our prayers answered" or "if God really exists, then He must either be powerless or not really love us and just leaves the world to its own devices." For both Jesus' listeners and us, the question of the effectiveness of God's kingdom is in the background. And if, according to our thoughts, God

isn't visibly effective, we doubt Him. And that's exactly why this parable about God's hidden works is so important. Throughout our lives, we can trust in the hidden actions of God in our world. But especially when it's about the proclamation of the Gospel. Even when we proclaim the Gospel through word and deed, we face disappointments. People either haven't found living faith in Christ or turn away from it. Truthfully, that's why I'm also disappointed. Shouldn't we do more, say more so that people change? Yet again and again, we feel powerless and disappointed in our thoughts and deeds. In the mission work, I constantly notice that we stumble over the practical questions of mission. Mission work is great, but how should we go about it? Should we limit ourselves to social and welfare work or should we only proclaim God's Word and leave the social work to someone else? And in this discussion, a change in perspective can really help us. The parable focuses our attention on God who works in secret in one way or another. That is the main moment. Perhaps there are disputes or even resignation when it comes to practical mission work. One says: "there's no point to it, I can't change anything!" This attitude only ever comes about when people are left completely on their own and have to rely entirely on their own abilities and gifts. This is not the case! Just as God gives the developing seed growth and prosperity, it is God who is 100 percent behind everything we do. And that's the only reason we can go out in great confidence, even if the prospect of success is low or not present at all.

Jesus' parable calls for a change in perspective – away from ourselves, away from our disappointments, towards marveling at God and His works in and among us. God wants us to be calm, as calm as the Sower who knows about the growth happening in secret. We can't reach God's kingdom through human influence nor through mission activity and even less through conversion fanaticism. None of this is our responsibility nor within our power. The farmer from the parable goes out and sows his seed. He goes out to sow because he knows that the seed grows. If he didn't know that he wouldn't put forth the effort. It's like that for us as Christians. Knowledge about God's works doesn't make us lethargic or hopeless, rather it is the driving force of all our actions. When we know that God it is alone who is at work, we act. In the Lord's Prayer, when we pray: "hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done...", let us not presume to be able to bring about God's kingdom through our prayers or actions nor to be able to bring about His will or to sanctify His name on our own. This has already happened and because it has happened, we pray. Because God's kingdom is already here, we also go out and sow the Word in the certain confidence that it will bear fruit because God causes it all to happen.

In His kingdom, God is always 100 percent behind will, ability, and accomplishment in every case. Precisely because we know that God Himself is behind all of this, we go forward proclaiming, evangelizing, serving, witnessing, helping and assisting. This corresponds precisely to the first commission that Jesus gave His disciples. At first, the disciples just stood on the holy mountain. It says there specifically: "but some doubted." Even though they saw Jesus, He wasn't really their center focal point. That's why they saw their own shortcomings. I can just imagine how one of them said: "I have only a one pair of sandals and I can't go all over the world in them" or "I'm diabetic and can't tolerate foreign food" or "I'm not gifted with speaking." With this in mind, Jesus says to us: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me..." Then comes this little addition that has so much meaning: "Therefore." Go *therefore* and preach, teach, and baptize. The disciples didn't do that so things would finally be better for them or for the church, they did it because Jesus has all authority. The church also doesn't act so that God's kingdom will come, but the church acts because God's kingdom has already come.

Jesus was aware of the coming of God's kingdom. He not only knew that God's kingdom was coming, but also saw it beginning directly with Himself. The parable of the growing seed can't give us proof of the secret workings of God – but Jesus can! Jesus knows the Father and that's why He can clearly and explicitly talk about God's kingdom because He knows how God the Father loves the world. That's why He is certain that God will not let up. God's reign will come because God loves steadfastly. And because God steadfastly loves us and comes close to us through Jesus, we can be certain that His kingdom comes. Amen.