

**Matthew 13:31 - 33, 44 - 52**

**Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 12A**

**July 30, 2023**

**The Rev. Katherine Bush**

It sounds very much like Jesus knew that the universe is expanding. The idea that Jesus could have grasped complex cosmology is a perfect example of one of the conundrums revealed by the Christian doctrine that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine; fully both, not half and half, not demi-god and demi-human. If Jesus is fully and completely human, then a middle-aged Jew in Palestine with a rudimentary education could not have known about atoms and galaxies and their constant movement outward from the Big Bang. If Jesus is fully and completely God, well, then he could. Jesus is both; thus, the conundrum.

And Jesus put before the crowds another parable, or actually five: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed ... the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. Like yeast that a woman took and mixed with three measures of flour. Like a hidden treasure in a field, for which he sells all that he has. Like a merchant who finds one pearl of great value. Like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind." The kingdom of heaven is expanding; it is by its very nature branching out, multiplying, growing. The kingdom of heaven is a place of abundance and even extravagance.

I've told you before about my joy and fascination with the James Webb telescope and its images of the far flung reaches of space, full of color and wonder. Webb follows in the path of the Hubble telescope, and Hubble is named for the man whose observations in 1925 demonstrated the movement, the expansion of distant galaxies. With delight, I imagine Jesus saying gently and with a twinkle in his eye, "I told you so." Jesus told the disbelieving crowds that the world was so much more than they could ever imagine. Jesus told the crowds the most amazing stories about the least amazing things, not about interstellar space but about the world of your front yard and kitchen table. Jesus told the crowds that the kingdom of heaven was simultaneously mind-blowing and mundane. Mustard seeds were trash seeds, almost like our kudzu; it would be frustrating to find that you had a few tiny mustard seeds mixed in with your intended crop. Yet, these unloved weeds could grow just about anywhere, and in the world of God, what is worthless to us still offers shelter and shade. The unheralded daily kitchen work of women is another minor miracle, taking course elements from the pantry and watching them rise into sustenance.

Whatever the metaphor, Jesus seems determined to tell anyone who will listen that their scope is set too small. Where we are used to empires battling over turf, Jesus suggests that God's realm has more room to roam, more than enough room for birds and enough bread for everyone on the hillside. In a cascade of parables today, Jesus keeps pushing the fences down and multiplying the grace and love on offer in a way that turns the idea of empire upside down and inside out. Any shrinking or scaling down we might be inclined to, even in the name of order and propriety - maybe especially in the name of order and propriety, is contrary to the kingdom of heaven that Jesus describes. His is invasive, unpredictable and always, always expanding.

It's fun to play with the idea of Jesus as an undercover astrophysicist, hinting two millennia ago at the broad reaches of God's imagination. Earlier this summer, I read an article by an astronomer named Adam Frank describing the discovery that the expanding universe is rippling, "humming" with waves of energy he said. "The universe is humming... Every proton and neuron in every atom from the tip of your toes to the top of your head is shifting, shuttling, and vibrating in a collective purr within which the entire history of the universe is implicated." This discovery doesn't change the nature of reality, it describes something that has always been true - but now we know. "All of a sudden, we *know* that we are humming in tune with the entire universe, that each of us contains the signature of everything that has ever been. It's all within us, around us, pushing us to and fro as we hurtle through the cosmos." Adam Frank offers a challenge in response to this scientific breakthrough. "Today, gifted with a new understanding of the architecture of the universe, each of us has an opportunity to revisit [the] wonder we knew as children ... a sense that the world is full of wonder, that everything is strange and amazing."

I don't know what Adam Frank thinks about Jesus, or Christianity, or religion in general, but to me, his message sounds like gospel good news; this is just another way of saying, the kingdom of heaven is bigger than you can grasp. We ought to spend more time with awe and wonder at the expansive love of God than with petty turf wars. When we try to contain the reach of God saying that anyone is beyond that reach, or when we close off our buildings or our schedules or our hearts or our minds, that is the opposite of kingdom work. Making the kingdom of heaven is about making room. The scale of God's realm is extravagant and maybe even a little ridiculous; the world of God is unbelievably vast even as it is composed of ordinary elements, dust and sand, bread and branches.

Jesus telling crowds of people about the kingdom of heaven doesn't change the nature of reality either, rather he describes something that has always been true - but now we know. The kingdom is at hand. We are humming in tune with the entire universe, each of us containing the signature of everything that has been: each seed, each merchant, each pearl, each woman baking bread. When we're sitting on the hillside listening to Jesus and we get a glimpse of God's architecture and its endless, expansive breadth, then we have a chance to grow our hearts to match. Whether Jesus knew about quantum physics or not, he knew the mind of God intimately, and he knew how deep, how broad, how high the kingdom of heaven could be. He showed us God's largesse in ways we could understand whether that was in the story of a mustard seed or in a story of the rippling, humming galaxy. How we can live in that kingdom, how we can hum along with that vision is our conundrum.