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Texts: Isaiah 43: 16-21, Luke 13:18-19

Sow the Seed, Trust the Promise

I don't come from a family of green thumbs. My parents had flower beds in the backyard that hosted the perennial collection of weeds beneath a lilac tree. Well intentioned attempts at a vegetable garden became afterthoughts by later summer, yielding a tangled mess of squash and un-staked cherry tomatoes. Unsurprisingly, I never took much interest in gardening.

The summer after my first year in seminary, a graduating friend asked if I was interested in taking over his plot at the community garden. I reluctantly agreed for two reasons: 1) I was on a graduate student budget and hoped to save money on my grocery bill and 2) I needed a distraction from all the grief I was feeling at the time.

It was admittedly a sad season for me. My beloved great-grandfather, whom I affectionately called Gramp, was nearing the end of his life. Meanwhile I spent long days and many nights interning as a hospital chaplain, encountering death, dying, and grief on a scale I had never encountered before. The grief was piling up in my personal and professional life in way that often felt too much, and I needed an outlet. The notion that I could help usher in abundant new life by sowing seeds and tending the soil was too rich a metaphor to pass up.

Lent is not the cheeriest of seasons on the Church calendar either. It's a 40-day journey with Jesus, which leads to the cross before arriving at the empty tomb. It's a time for examining the health of our spirit and our relationship to God. It's a season that can hold even our feelings of sadness and loss, while at the same time reminding that God's healing presence is steadfast in offering hope. While we associate Easter with blooming lilies, Lent is a time for sowing seeds. We come to Lent hoping something abundant and new will grow from the seeds of our hope. We sow seeds and trust in God's promises.

Our passage from Isaiah was written while the Jewish people were in exile in Babylon. They despaired – not only being driven from their homes, but also the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. On the one hand, the sense of pain and loss over these events stirred grief, anger, and disillusionment, most clearly documented in the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel. On the other, the experience stirred passages like this that capture the hope that God has a future in store in which each and every one of us matter.

Through the prophet, God tells the brokenhearted exiles, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" This is a puzzling statement considering the previous verses are tied up in the history of God rescuing them from Egypt. What is the point of reminding someone of the past, and then immediately telling them to forget it? Surely, they would have loved for God to offer a

repeat. Why not? It worked pretty well in the past, and I would surely be comfortable if I could simply look back to plan for the future.

What if God is advising us to not let our old stories close our eyes to the fertile soil right in front of us? God's priority is not to merely comfort us with the old but to make us whole with something radically new. Through the Spirit of the living Christ, the ground is prime for seeds as humble as a mustard seed with a future as grand as the tallest trees to burst forth into the world. "Can you not perceive it?"

Cultivating mustard seed style stories has grown into a cottage industry. Clearly, they are in vogue when nearly every successful tech company was founded in someone's garage. We know, of course, that not everything grows in an in-breaking of the kin-dom.

Yet there are exciting seeds of the kin-dom taking root locally and transforming lives. Over four years ago, the Christian Activities Council, a parachurch organization in Hartford, decided it was time for a new start. After many years as a service delivery focused organization, they hired a new director who insisted on shifting to a community organizing model. They wanted to begin addressing problems with long-term solutions rather than temporary relief.

Those of you acquainted with organizing know that it isn't glamorous work. True organizing takes place one-on-one, and so they began going through their nearby community and listening to the residents' stories and concerns. They arranged for meetings for residents to share their stories and to listen for where they had issues in common—the more specific, the better. Their organizers taught that the residents had power to challenge the organized people and the organized money of the forces that oppressed them.

They went on to organize the North End Power Team. One of their first actions was to advocate for tenants living in rodent infested public housing, who couldn't move without jeopardizing their benefit. As you may have read in the Courant, the team pressured the mayor's office and HUD to crack down on the slumlord and offer the residents vouchers to move to safe housing. Any of you familiar with all of the layers of local and federal government involved in such an action, know that this was no small accomplishment. God was at work in something as simple as people sharing their stories, and it blossomed into collective actions that addressed the needs of people in the North End.

This seed of hope also took root in other people organizing across lines of race, town, and religious traditions. All across greater Hartford, there are teams of people listening to stories and holding meetings to cut issues. Just this past month, 250 people of faith from storefront churches to tall steeple churches and everything in between gathered last month at Congregation Beth Israel for house meetings. Clergy and lay leaders, including members of First Church, are organizing to make God's justice and love real here in greater Hartford. Just like the work of the North End Power Team, it's rooted in one-on-one conversations and relationship proceeds issues, and faith that something as small as an individual story can lead to lives transformed for the better.

Whether it's organizing or life, it isn't easy to isolate every variable as to what makes a seeds grow. A mustard seed weighs less than 1/600 of a gram and it grows into a tree that can reach over 20 feet tall. For everything to go right from seed to mature height is miraculous, when you pause to think of it. Ultimately, there's a level of faith and trust that goes into whatever seed you plant.

My first summer of farming yielded amazing growth. I had plenty of lettuce and veggies to munch on and more importantly a place to sink my hands into the dirt, to be a part of God's work nurturing seeds. One evening after a long day at the hospital, I used the cucumbers to make some soggy pickles that my supportive friends assured me were delicious. A few weeks after my great-grandfather finally died at the ripe age of 96, I gathered some green tomatoes for the recipe the two of us had made nearly a decade before. Inside my tiny apartment, I chopped the tomatoes and prepared the cheesecloth spice bag as the September wind blew in a new season. When I finally tasted a spoonful of the mixture simmering on the stove, the flavors were at once robust and complex in a way that only something made with love can be. It brought me back to my Gramp's kitchen and at the same time opened up a new way forward for me. My season of grief had finally passed.

In the Isaiah text, God comes on strong when God says, "Do not remember the former things." Knowing the power of our memories and stories to usher in growth, perhaps the point is indeed that we not get stuck in them. There is no doubt God is breaking into the world like a mustard seed. Living as followers of Jesus demands we keep our eyes open to God's work in the present. The kin-dom is already beginning to sprout up all around. "Do you not perceive it?" If you don't, there's no time better than now to begin sowing seeds.

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