

Be Astonished, Part II
The Astonishing Things Jesus Said
About Life in the Kingdom of God
Mark 4.1-32

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We are all born with an innate desire to want to make a difference. To be able to point to something and say I did that. I accomplished that. I made that difference.

Here is the world before me. Here is the world after me. And there, that – that is the thing I did, the difference I made, the mark I left. That is the fruit of my life. That is why I was here.

I still remember when I was in my thirties hiking to the top of a fourteen thousand foot peak in Colorado with my two good friends Mike and Rick. The thing we talked about all the way up and all the way back down was, “What do you want to be remembered for? What do you want them to say about you at your funeral?”

Six months before he died, and knowing that he was dying, the twenty five year old poet John Keats wrote to a friend describing how he would lie awake anxious every night, thinking:

"If I should die ... I have left no immortal work behind me - nothing to make my friends proud of my memory. . . . If I had had time I would have made myself remembered."

We all want to be able to point to something and say “That is my accomplishment. That is the difference my life made. I lived a fruitful life. It counted for something. That’s the thing I want to be remembered for.”

We’ve just started into the second part of our spring sermon series on Mark’s gospel. Up till Easter Sunday we focused on all the amazing things that Jesus did. Now we’re focusing on all the amazing things that Jesus said.

As Brently pointed out last Sunday, Mark tells us (1.22, 27) that whenever Jesus spoke, the people were astonished by what they heard.

In this series we’re exploring what made the teaching of Jesus so astonishing.

The passage we come to today, in Mark chapter four, is a collection of teachings about what it means to live a fruitful life. And what Jesus has to say about it really is astonishing.

It seems to me there are two main ways the world around us teaches us to think about the difference we might make with our lives and the way we will be remembered.

The first way the world teaches us to live a life that is memorable is to seek *to make a mark*.

We want to be remembered for what we accomplished. Our success, our accomplishments, the memorable things we did, the way we carved our name in the tree of history. When we think about making a mark, we want to be remembered by others for what we did for ourselves.

This way of thinking about a fruitful life is perfectly captured in Ben Franklin's quip: "If you don't want to be forgotten as soon as you are dead, either write something worth reading or do something worth writing."

There's a similar line from Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Death comes to everyone, but great acts build a monument which shall endure until the end of time."

"Make your mark" is a message that comes through loud and clear from the world around us, isn't it? It's the theme of every graduation message you've ever heard. "You are amazing. There's never been another you. The sky is the limit. Go and make your mark."

The second way our world teaches us to live a memorable life, though less common than the first, is to seek *to leave a legacy*.

When we think about leaving a legacy, we're still concerned to be remembered, but we want to be remembered for what we did for others.

This approach to being remembered is captured well by Adam Silveira, who said: "No one goes on [forever], but what we leave behind keeps us alive for others."

Or Maya Angelou, who said: "If you're going to live, leave behind a legacy. Make an impact on the world that can never be erased."

That too is a perspective that is drilled into us by the culture around us. Just take a walk across the Purdue campus: The Atlas Family Marketplace, The Robert and Terry Bowen Laboratory, The Yue-Kong Pao Hall of Visual and Performing Arts, The Thomas Page Pavilion, The Walter W. Wade Utility Plant, even The Melvin Ollman Golfcart Barn.

Please don't hear me being critical of those wonderfully generous gifts or calling into question the motives behind them. My point is just that we live in a culture that encourages us to think of a fruitful life in terms of our own name being permanently attached to the thing we did for others.

So from the perspective of our culture, either way, whether for the mark we make for ourselves or the legacy we leave for others, we are encouraged to live to be remembered.

And then along comes Jesus, who calls us to an astonishing third alternative. Don't live your life curved in upon yourself, eager to be remembered for what you did. Let me open your life up toward me and out toward others. Live in a way that I will be remembered for and others will be blessed by.

All of which brings us to the passage we're considering today: Mark chapter 4, verses 1 through 20.

In this chapter Jesus teaches using parables, which are metaphors in story form. The kingdom of God is like a field, or a farmer, or a net, or a neighbor, or a seed, or a son. This is like that.

With each parable Jesus takes us from what is familiar to us – life on this earth – to what is unfamiliar to us – life in the kingdom of God.

In the middle of the story we're about to look at, between when Jesus tells the parable and when he explains it, we find this verse in which Jesus explains, at least in part, why he teaches in parables.

Mark 4.10-12

When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"

Jesus is saying parables are like lenses. If you look through them the wrong way, everything becomes blurry. But if you look through them the right way, everything becomes focused and clear.

And then Jesus tells us the trick to looking through the lens of the parables the right way. It is to see these parables as keys that unlock the *secrets of the kingdom of God*.

Jesus came to earth to establish a kingdom. The first words out of Jesus' mouth in Mark's gospel are: "The time has come! The kingdom of God is at hand!" (1.15)

You only need two things to have a kingdom. A king. And subjects who have given their allegiance to the king.

Jesus claims that he is the king. Every time he called himself Messiah or Christ, he called himself king. When he rode into Jerusalem on the donkey, the crowds cried out, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” He tells the religious leaders he is the king. When he died on the cross, he died under the title “The King of the Jews.” His resurrection validated every claim he made to kingship, and when he ascended to heaven, he ascended to be seated on the throne.

Jesus is the king. That’s why we use the crown logo around here, to remind us of that central truth.

And wherever his loving rule is acknowledged in the hearts of men, and women, and children, that is where we find his kingdom.

King Jesus invites us to enter into his kingdom and become his subjects, to give him our allegiance and live our lives under his loving rule.

Apart from Jesus, we are all the kings and queens of our own lives, living our lives under our own rule.

In these verses Jesus says his teaching will make no sense whatsoever unless this is the lens through which we look at it and him: that *he* is king, and we are his subjects, living our lives not for ourselves but for him, under his loving rule.

Let me just pause there. Is that how you understand who Jesus is and who you are? That Jesus is king and you are his subject, giving him your allegiance, and joyfully living your life under his loving rule?

Some of you have recently come to the point where you recognize Jesus as the king and have given him your allegiance. If you are a new follower of Jesus, next Sunday during worship we are providing the chance for you to publicly express your faith. And if you’ve never been baptized, you will have the chance to be baptized as well. If you’re interested, contact us at the church this week to let us know you’d like to be part of that.

So in the passage we’re exploring this morning, Jesus is talking about that desire that resides deep inside each of us to live a life that matters, to make a difference, to live a fruitful life.

His teaching comes into the middle of a longer Biblical conversation about living a fruitful life that literally takes us from the first chapter of the Bible to the last one.

Bearing Fruit from Genesis to Revelation

Genesis 1.27-28:	God created human beings, blessed them, and said, “Be fruitful.”
Psalms 1.1-3	Those who delight in the LORD are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season.
Jeremiah 17.5-8	Those who trust in the LORD are like trees with roots that reach deep into the water. They never stop producing fruit.
John 15.1-8	(Jesus says) Those who remain in me will produce much fruit. When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples.
Revelation 22.1-2	(In the new creation, using symbols to describe the people of God) A river with the water of life flowed from the throne of God. On each side grew a tree of life bearing twelve crops of fruit.

God created us to live lives that bear fruit. So let's listen in on what Jesus has to say about living a fruitful life.

Farm Field Near Galilee



As we turn there, take a look at this picture. It was taken along the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee.

It's wonderful because it captures so beautifully everything we're about to hear in this passage. Jesus tells a parable about a farmer sowing seed in a field.

This is what an ancient farm field looked like in the area where Jesus taught. It's a long narrow field that would have been cleared and then sown by hand.

You can see the hard access path alongside it, the patch of weeds around the edges endlessly encroaching upon it, the soil with the rocks all through it, and the healthy plants growing within it.

And you can also see the Sea of Galilee in the background, where Jesus sat in a boat and talked about a field just like this one to the crowds of people who gathered around him on the shore.

Okay, with that picture in mind . . .

Mark 4.1

Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge.

Mark 4.2-4

He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.

Mark 4.5-6

Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.

Mark 4.7-9

Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain (literally it says "bear fruit"). Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop (or bore fruit), some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times." Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

Later, when he was alone with his followers, they asked him to tell them about the parable.

Mark 4.12-15

Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.

Jesus says the way a seed grows in a field is like the way we respond and grow spiritually when we come in contact with Jesus's teaching.

Jesus is the farmer who sows the word. The people who hear his teaching are the fields where the seed lands. For some, the word, his teaching, doesn't penetrate at all. It never gets taken in. The person is untouched by what he or she hears.

Have you allowed your heart to be penetrated by the teachings of Jesus?

At this point we might expect Jesus to be setting up a contrast between those who respond to his teaching and grow and those who don't. But that's not the point he's making. Mere growth, it turns out, isn't enough, as we see in the next section.

Mark 4.16-17

Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.

You probably are aware that the first growth of a new seedling is always down, sending down a root to begin to gather water and nutrients from the soil before it sends up a shoot. You don't have to be an agricultural expert to know that the health of the root is crucial to the health of the plant.

This next group of plants grows, but they fail to thrive because they don't get established. There's no foundation. Without strong roots, they lack access to the thing that will sustain their spiritual growth. There's a flash of spiritual interest but no solid spiritual footing. The things that anchor a person's growing faith – things like regular time in worship and prayer and scripture study and with God's people – are spotty and insufficient. Not enough is coming in.

The result? When trouble and persecution come – and Jesus implies that they inevitably will – these plants aren't able to survive.

Trouble has to do with pressure. The world tries to push us back into its mold. Persecution has to do with pursuit. It chases after us to try to catch us and bring us back in line.

As I'm sure you've noticed, following Jesus takes us out of step with our surrounding culture. Our going a different way and valuing different things and seeing things through a different set of priorities feels like an accusation to the world around us.

So when we get out of step with the world around us, in subtle and not so subtle ways our world exerts pressure on us to get us back in line with its values and pursuits. It is as true today when we say Jesus is king as it was back in Jerusalem under Pilate when Jesus said he was king.

The world pushes back. Without a solid root system we won't be able to withstand the pressure.

How are your roots? What are you doing to access the life and power of God in your life?

Mark 4.18-19

Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.

The implication with this group of plants is that they have taken root and gotten established and grown. They've got good roots and they're on a solid trajectory of growth. But then problems begin – not external pressures but problems of the heart.

And I think they come down to the fact that they haven't resolved the question of where their allegiance really lies.

Three things crowd out the sunlight and choke off the spiritual growth.

The worries of this world refers to any of the myriad things in the present world that we can let fill our hearts and distract our thoughts and pull is in different directions. It could be anything, even a good thing, that we get absorbed with, get caught up in, can't stop thinking about, or make the central concern of our life.

The deceitfulness of wealth could also be translated as the deception of abundance. When we have a lot, as most of us do, our much gives us the false impression that we have all, that we can shift our dependence from the God from whom all those things come to the things themselves.

The desires of other things gets at anything we give inordinate weight to, or our hearts get too attached to: career, kids, money, degrees, sports, health, relationships, life circumstances – we could go on. As Augustine said, God made us for himself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in him. God alone can satisfy us. There isn't anything on this planet that can fulfill us or bring us the rest and peace we long for. But that doesn't mean we don't try, again and again and again, to find some replacement to fill that vacuum.

What is the thing most on your mind, and first in your heart?

In the last lines of verse 19, Jesus comes to the real issue at the heart of this parable. These plants send down roots and they grow up. The problem with these plants is they are *unfruitful*. They fail to fulfill their purpose.

Their misplaced allegiances, their divided hearts, their looking for satisfaction in things that will never be able to deliver – those things lead these men and women to lack the fruit beyond themselves, in the lives of others, for which they were made.

I know a man, a very gifted man, who has a private seat on the Chicago Stock Exchange. Each day he goes in with the sole goal of trying to increase his own personal wealth. No matter how successful he may end up, that, from Jesus' perspective, is an unfruitful life, because it benefits no one but himself.

In the 1300s an anonymous monk from Frankfurt, Germany, wrote a wonderful book with a terrible title. It's called *Theologia Germanica*. In it he writes:

All men who are without the True Light are bent in upon themselves, and think much of themselves, and seek and propose their own ends in all things, and whatever is most pleasant and convenient to themselves they hold to be best.
(71)

Jesus has a much larger life in mind for us than a life that is defined by our own small selves. God created us and Jesus redeemed us for his sake and for the sake of others.

Mark 4.20

Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop (again, the expression is bear fruit)—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.

Turns out this isn't a parable comparing four different kinds of soil, or four different levels of spiritual maturity. It is a parable that compares *two* different kinds of plants, those that bear fruit the way God intends and others that don't.

The way God intends us to grow is in a *fruitful* way, to bear fruit, to live in a way that makes a difference in the lives of others without thought of ourselves.

The way God intends for us to grow is also in a *self-forgetful* way. In a biblical way of thinking, a plant needs to die in order for it to multiply. To die to concern for self, to ruling our own lives, to life on our terms and for our sake.

In the kingdom of God, when we think about living fruitful lives, we're invited to open our lives up toward God and out toward others, with the thought that he and not we would made much of, and that others and not we would be blessed.

What is the fruit that Jesus has in mind? What is the thing Jesus intends us to give away that will multiply in the lives of others? Love and faith.

Showing love changes the lives of those God places around us, and sharing our faith changes their eternities.

When we show love – when we are patient and thoughtful and kind and caring and forgiving, when we seek God’s best for the other person – we show that we are followers of Jesus and his faithful subjects, and we put the kingdom of God on display.

And when we share our faith and lead others to come to know the Lord as we do, we expand the kingdom of God, spreading the realm over which Jesus rules.

Theologia Germanica says:

A person should stand so free, being so rid of concern for himself – that is, of his I, and Me, and Self, and Mine, and the like – that in all things he seeks or regards himself no more than if he did not exist, and takes as little account of himself as if someone else had done all his works. (23)

The more the Self, the I, the Me, the Mine, that is, self-seeking and selfishness, abate in a man, the more does God’s I, that is God Himself, increase in him. (27)

Living lives in that sort of self-forgetful, self-emptying way is nonsense . . . *unless* Jesus is who he says he is, and we are who he says we are.

When Jesus is King, and we live under his loving rule, a life lived in such a way that God will be remembered and others will be blessed makes perfect sense.

Jesus says, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”

In his book *The Second Mountain*, which he wrote while he was becoming a Christian, commentator David Brooks describes people whose lives have what he calls a “two mountain shape.” He captures perfectly the turning-inside-out that happens in the life of a follower of Jesus.

They got out of school, began their career or started a family, and identified the mountain they thought they were meant to climb. I’m going to be a cop, a doctor, an entrepreneur, what have you.

The goals on that first mountain are the normal goals that our culture endorses – to be a success, to be well thought of, to get invited into the right social circles, and to experience personal happiness. It’s all the normal stuff: nice home, nice family, nice vacations, good food, good friends, and so on.

People on this first mountain spend a lot of time thinking about reputation management. How do I measure up?

Then something happens.

Some people get to the top of the first mountain, taste success, and find it ... unsatisfying. “Is this all there is?”

Other people get knocked off that mountain by some failure.

For still others, something unexpected happens that knocks them sideways: the death of a child, a cancer scare, some life-altering tragedy that was not part of the original plan.

Whatever the cause, these people are no longer on the mountain. They are down in the valley of bewilderment or suffering.

Some shrivel in the face of this kind of suffering. But for others, this valley is the making of them. They see deeper into themselves and realize deep down in the substrate, there is a yearning to transcend the self and care for others. They realize the desires of the ego are never going to satisfy the deep regions they have discovered in themselves.

At this point, people realize, Oh, that first mountain wasn't my mountain after all.

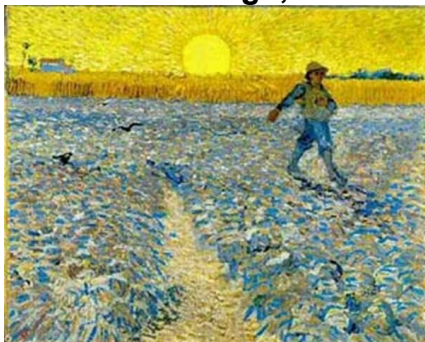
Some people radically alter their lives when this happens. They give up their law practices and move to Tibet. They quit their jobs as consultants and become teachers in inner-city schools. Others stay in their basic fields but spend their time differently. Some others stay in their same jobs and their same relationships, but are transformed. It's not about self anymore; it's about a summons. Something outside, not inside.

If the first mountain is about building up the ego and defining the self, the second mountain is about shedding the ego and losing the self.

You don't climb the second mountain the way you climb the first mountain. You conquer the first mountain. You are conquered by the second mountain. You surrender to its summons. (David Brooks, *The Second Mountain*, xi-xvi)

What is God's summons to you?

Vincent Van Gogh, *The Sower*



Here's a picture that I think perfectly captures the mark God intends for us to make with our lives, the legacy he intends us to leave.

You may not be aware that Vincent Van Gogh was an evangelist to coal miners before he became an artist. In his art he often came back to the image of the sower and the field.

I love this image. In the foreground, the Sower sowing seed, striding with authority, as though he owns the place, clearly the main focus of the painting, the one to whom our eye returns again and again. In the background, wide fields packed and overflowing with grain, the picture of a multiplied life. And over all, representing the loving presence of God, the bright light of the sun.

What do I want my life to be about? What do I want to be remembered for? What do I want people to see when they see me? That.

What about you?