

MUSTARD BUSH PARBLE SURPRISES AUDIENCE

Jesus could tell a catchy story. He had a way of starting out innocently, hooking his hearers, and then ending up with a real zinger. On the way he could exaggerate almost to the point of disbelief. But when he got to the end, his audience would be surprised or provoked into changing their way of thinking.

A good case in point is his parable about a mustard bush. This story can be found three places in the Christian scriptures, but the version in Mark 4:30-32 will do as an example of his catchy technique.

Jesus is talking about the Kingdom of God. "You can compare it to a grain of mustard," he suggests. "When you sow it on the ground, it's the smallest of all the seeds around.

"But then it grows and grows and grows. Until it's larger than all the other shrubs in your garden. In fact, it puts out such large branches that the birds can nest in its shade!"

He was pulling somebody's leg, at least a little. Mustard seeds are proverbially small, but technically there are a few other species that are tinier. Mustard plants do grow about three or four feet tall in Palestine, and some are reported to reach up to eight or ten feet.

Birds do alight near mustard bushes to find some shade and to pick at the seeds. But the branches of the mustard shrub, a self-seeding annual, are little more than twigs in the spring when birds are building their nests.

Jesus was exaggerating in order to make a point.

Perhaps his point was to catch his hearers off guard and to shake loose some faulty ideas about how God works. Many people have the idea that God must always do great things.

He must muscle his way in, knock over whatever enemies are lurking around, and sashay off with a fist full of trophies. And many folks hope they'll be guaranteed a share in the goodies.

Notice, however, that Jesus' parable is not of the "great oaks from lowly acorns" variety. It is about an overgrown weed, not a solid skyscraping tree. His audience must have sensed the incongruity of comparing God's reign to a bush which grows in a corner of the garden.

By starting with such an innocuous comparison, Jesus could lure his listeners into getting caught up in the story. You can almost picture them standing around wondering where he was going with that mustard seed idea.

Then when he ended up with the incredible picture of birds building nests on the branches of a bush, they must have stood there with their jaws dropping.

It blows your mind. The trouble is that today readers of the Bible are looking for something safe and pious. So they miss some of the real surprises. It's a little tricky trying to recapture the shock which rabbi Jesus must have provoked, but try this on for size:

How can you describe the way God works? It's like a 1943 Studebaker, a rather mediocre car when it came off the assembly line. But out on the highway it shifted into overdrive and really rode along. And before the month was out, it had placed third in the Indianapolis 500!

The Bible's version is better, of course. This tale of the remarkable Studebaker is only meant to reproduce some of the flavor of Jesus original story. His ideas about the way God handles his Kingdom weren't what most people expected to hear.

And that was good. For most of the people who tagged along after Jesus, life in the Kingdom was an iffy proposition at best. They couldn't find it in the first place, and they weren't sure they qualified to enter in the second place.

His motley crew of fisher-folk, tax collectors, rabble-rousers and assorted neer-do-wells might never have imagined themselves as an authentic part of God's people.

So with this story about a mustard bush Jesus managed to open their eyes to a new idea. That new idea, which suggests that God can use garden-variety people as well as garden-variety bushes, must have surprised them into sampling the sheer delight of God's reign.

You won't be left out just because you're common, for God has a shocking way of including you in.