Kings and Kingdoms; Trees, Shrubs and Weeds
1 Samuel 15:34-16:3
Mark 4:26-34

There is a common question running through this morning's readings: what kind of king and kingdom should God's people have? But the question is posed through relationships with land, plants, and animals -that range from mutual benefit to outright exploitation.

The Hebrew Bible readings are about kings.

when there is no obvious successor to the prophet Samuel to lead Israel, the people demand a king "to be like other nations"
God enumerates in detail what kings do in order to make war and to live in luxury.
A king will extract wealth by disrupting relationships with family, land, plants and animals: He will take your sons to build and run before his chariots, and take a portion of your fields, vineyards, orchards, cattle, donkeys, flocks.

But the people ignore God's warning and Saul is made king. And, in the space of 6 short chapters, falls out of favour and so begins today's reading.

God tells Samuel to go to Bethlehem and anoint one of Jesse's sons to be king - *while Saul is still king.*

Seven of Jesse's sons pass by and are not chosen and finally Samuel asks, are all your sons here?
The send for the youngest who is keeping the sheep. -and king David is anointed.

Who remembers what we learned about sheep on Good Shepherd Sunday?
In many cultures tending the flocks is a job relegated to women and children. Sheep teach us about the intelligence of the collective, about trust, and community. They also really teach about the gifts of fear and vigilance."

The idea of the King being a shepherd is a recurring theme in scripture -what kind of lessons from tending sheep might equip someone for kingship?

What lessons and experiences might make the youngest child a good leader?

Psalm 20
The psalm today is called a Royal Psalm, it is a prayer for the king's military victory. The shortest version might be "God Save the King"

I want to draw your attention to Verses 7 and 8,
Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses,
but our pride is in the name of the LORD our God.
They will collapse and fall, but we shall rise and stand upright.

Remember the warning from 1 Samuel "a king will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots, and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots" remember what happens to Pharoah's chariots in Exodus?
Chariots were the height of military technology, and repeatedly in scripture they are portrayed in a way that condemns not just the war-making of kings, but of the exploitation of land, animals, and humans that war entails.

So in effect the Hebrew bible readings present a choice: shepherd king or horse king, chariot king?

While the Hebrew bible is about Kings, The Gospel is about the Kingdom.
God's Kingdom was Jesus' core message, the main thing that he talked about and the thing that he demonstrated with his actions.
Jesus says God's kingdom is like the mysterious sprouting of grain in the earth and a mustard seed.

Before we start with the Mustard seed I want to take a little detour ask who is familiar with:
The broadway musical Wicked?
Barbara Kingsolver's Demon Copperhead?
The Western film the Magnificent Seven

These are all remakes -a classic story retold with a shift in perspective.
This happens in the bible as well.

Take a look at your gospel reading in the bulletin while I read from the prophet Ezekiel.

Thus says the Lord:
I myself will take a sprig
from the lofty top of a cedar;
from the topmost of its young twigs;
I myself will plant it
on a high and lofty mountain.
in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit,
and become a noble cedar.
Under it every kind of bird will live;
in the shade of its branches will nest
winged creatures of every kind.

Do you see some similarities? What about differences?

Often in the Hebrew bible there are parables about kings and kingdoms told in the language of trees - often they are satires about kings

Very often these parables include cedars.
Now the Cedars of Lebanon occupied a similar place in the ancient near east that Western Red Cedar occupy in our province.

One of the largest and long-lived trees, they grow in huge forests, versatile wood logged for domestic and export. Used for everyday and luxury products. The cedars of Lebanon were subject to a massive deforestation campaign such that in Jesus time cedars would only be seen in palaces and temples.

Biblically, when we hear about Cedar Wood it conveys wealth and luxury
But when we hear about Cedar Trees it conveys superlative -the largest, the tallest, the strongest
In other words Cedar is both the tree of kings and the king of trees

So you see now why Jesus might have used the parable of the king of trees to talk about the kingdom of God,

But why do you think he replaced cedar with mustard?

2000 years ago, Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder wrote:

'Mustard ... with its pungent taste and fiery effect is extremely beneficial for the health. It grows entirely wild once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once' (Natural History: 19.170-171).

There were even laws prohibiting planting mustard near field crops because of its threat to other plants.

If Jesus were telling this parable in our bioregion he might have said the kingdom of God is like a dandelion seed
or a patch of Himalayan blackberry, or horsetail rhizome
–all of these are useful plants but once they take hold are tenacious and hard to get rid of.

Unlike Ezekiel's parable, Matthew and Luke's version of this parable there isn't any planter or gardener. -the seed is what my dad might have called a volunteer or even a weed. In the story the plant, indeed the ecosystem is the main actor -seeding itself and making an inviting place for other creatures.

What about these other creatures?
How many of you are gardeners?
Do you like it when the birds of the air are attracted to your garden? Or do you put up scare crows?

Mustard is small, pungent, firey, and aggressively invasive, Self seeding, fast growing, bird attracting.

if you were a member of a new, small community, of outsiders of low status people, under Roman occupation, with a passionate leader, starting to attract crowds? How might this story make you feel? -hopeful maybe?

What if after John the Baptist, and Jesus, and other leaders of the early church had been arrested, jailed, executed as a threat to the established order, would you want to remember that story and re-tell it? A story about a plant that can't be stopped from springing up?

By reframing Ezekiel's parable, which his hearers would have known well, Jesus presents the choice: Cedar kingdom or mustard kingdom.

Over the course of the last 2000 years the church has often chosen the chariot king and the cedar kingdom with towering worship structures and beliefs indistinguishable from the empires of the day.

What about now, if you were a follower of Jesus -that shepherd king, that riding on donkey not a war horse king – in a time when plenty of people are lamenting the bygone cedar days -when we had 3 choirs and 200 kids in School.

Would that mustard kingdom give you hope? Could we still be

-small, tenacious, fiery, showing up where people say we shouldn't, posing a threat to the ordered garden,
A place of welcome for people who don't belong or aren't wanted anywhere else?

As we consider the choices that are always before us -shepherd king, or war-horse king; cedar kingdom or mustard kingdom it is good to remember how

Ezekiel's version of the parable ends
All the trees of the field shall know
  that I am the Lord.
I bring low the high tree,
  I make high the low tree;