

Hidden Work

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Ancient Witness: Mark 4:1-9

There's a saying that goes, "If you want to make God laugh, tell Her your plans." You know, often we think we're in control. We think we know what the future does or doesn't hold. Sometimes we think that we've got the world by the tail, that everything is going well. Other times we might think that things are falling apart, that we can't go on, that nothing is going to work out.

But we don't know, not really. There are things happening that are hidden from our view. There are secret workings going on. As the poet, Wendell Berry, wrote:

*And yet no leaf or grain is filled
By work of ours; the field is tilled
And left to grace. That we may reap.
Great work is done while we're asleep.*

There is so much going on that we cannot see. Some of it good, some of it not so good. If it were possible for us to know, probably we would weep. And most certainly we would laugh. But we do not know. God only knows.

There's a beautiful passage from the Letter to the Hebrews:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than a two-edged sword, piercing to the divisions of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before God no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare before the eyes of the One with whom we have to do.

The idea is that nothing is hidden from God. God's awareness reaches deeply to the heart of all things, even to secret thoughts and intentions. For God, there are endless possibilities but no big surprises. For us, possibilities seem much more limited. At times we can't see any at all. And life is just one surprise after another. Some good, some not so good.

Jesus once said that God "makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." (Mt 5:45) The future brings drought and floods, it brings life-giving rain and beautiful sunshine. We've gotten better at forecasting some of these things. But we cannot control them, and we can only take them as they come.

Good things may shower upon us. Brightness may shine upon us. Other times we might be scorched or drowned by certain events.

But here's the thing: we just don't know. There might be something going on right now—right this very minute—the results of which might cause us great happiness or sorrow. But we are completely in the dark. Oblivious. Many times our lives have changed long before we realize it. A virus mutates and infects a human being, changing our lives and setting into motion a deadly pandemic that would emerge a year later.

Let's say you are one of the millions in the country who is unemployed. You've been looking and looking, but so far come up empty. It's been over a year and you are getting depressed, discouraged. You're ready to give up, throw in the towel. Meanwhile, a friend of a friend has talked with an acquaintance about you. And there is a job they decide is just perfect for you. This person is going to give you a call next week. *Your life has already changed, but you don't know it yet.* You don't even have a clue. There are things going on in secret, under the surface. Hidden work.

Or let's say that you have finally decided what you want to do with your life. And you've come up with a plan. You go back to school. Get a degree. Interview. Network. Work your connections. Put together an impressive resume. Get your dream job. Pinch me; I'm in heaven.

Only, a few years ago, a few cells in your body have mysteriously started to multiply. These are not good cells. *You haven't noticed anything yet, but your life has changed. You just don't know it yet.* Even though you are vigilant about going to the doctor and good about getting check-ups. Even with all of the latest in medical tests and care, the growing number of cells has gone undetected. The sun shines on the evil and the good. The rain falls on the just and the unjust.

You want to make God laugh? Tell Her your plans. You want to make God laugh? Tell Her that things are hopeless, that there are no more possibilities. There's that, too.

The truth is that we just do not know. We may think we have it nailed down, that we have a pretty good idea, but we really don't have a clue. There is work that is totally hidden from us. Wild. Unpredictable. Unfathomable.

There's this great prayer by Thomas Merton that I picked up when I did a retreat at Gethsemane. It starts out:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end.

And this is why we keep trying, why we never give up—because you never know. This is why we try to align ourselves with the intentions of the sacred in our lives. As Merton's prayer concludes:

I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road though I know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I seem to be lost in the shadow of death.

God is planting seeds within us and the world around us, helping us to choose, helping us to plant our own seeds, helping us through this unpredictable adventure called life.

The future is always open, full of possibilities. We've planted some seeds here, with this congregation. Some have sprouted, some haven't. What the future holds, for us we really don't know. Some changes may have happened already about which we don't even know yet. But there's one thing we *do* know. There's a lot of work going on hidden from our view—under the surface—without our awareness. People have been having conversations; forces have been set in motion; and there's God—silently and secretly speaking to the heart of all things. We don't know if the result will be good or bad, rain or sunshine. The seed of God's intention may sprout and grow, or it may not.

You may have heard about a phenomenon that some scientists have labeled, “The Butterfly Effect.” It basically says that our physical universe is so intricate, so interrelated, that a butterfly fluttering its wings at one corner of the world can lead to a massive hurricane raging in another part of the planet. These things happen, and they are ultimately beyond human comprehension.

One of the parables that Jesus told was the Parable of the Sower. Some seeds sprout; some don't. Sometimes goodness flourishes and grows; sometimes not. Sometimes there's this incredible harvest, a yield of a hundred fold; sometimes there is no yield at all. It's hard to know. There are so many factors, many of which are completely out of our control. There are birds and rocky soil and thorns. And that's just to name a few.

As usual, this parable probably didn't offer enough comfort to Jesus' followers. Later in this chapter, the gospel writers depict Jesus explaining his own parable, which is what he almost never did. Scholars feel that this interpretation of the parable was really the work of the early church after Jesus died.

This interpretation said that the “soil” is really the individual. And we each have personal responsibility to be “good soil,” to have “honest and good hearts” (in Luke's version), to be “patient,” to be accepting of the word and to be “understanding” (in Matthew's version).

Now, no doubt, all of this hidden work that is going on should not be an excuse for people not to try. We, too, have an effect on how things turn out. We have a responsibility to be “good soil” and to allow God's goodness take root in us. But to reduce this parable to this single dimension would be a mistake, it seems to me. The nature of parables is that they operate on many different levels, and they constantly reveal themselves to us. They defy singular explanations. (The version in Thomas proves that the parable once circulated without interpretation attached to it.)

We are the soil, yes indeed, but so is the entire universe. And we, ourselves, may also sow. Sometimes on God's behalf we sow and plant seeds. Sometimes it is successful; sometimes not. And it's important to realize that there is so much beyond our control.

Ask any farmer, anyone who sows for a living, and they will tell you. You can be the best farmer in the world, the most competent, most diligent, and your crops can still be wiped out. And on the other hand, sometimes you can be surprised by incredible abundance.

A little later in Mark there is another parable from Jesus (4:26-27):

God's imperial rule (or kingdom) is like this: Suppose someone sows seed on the ground, and sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and matures, although the sower is unaware of it.

People can plant, and the seeds may grow, but they know not how. Most of it depends on other things. It is the earth that really does the producing: the sun, the rain, the soil, the bees. Does that mean we should stop? No, quite the opposite. Because, you see, you never know. You never know.

I once heard Ram Dass tell a story, and I think I might have shared it with you before. But it really fits here, so I'll share it again.

There once was a man who had a beautiful horse. One day the gate was left open and the horse got away. The people were very kind and empathetic, and they said, "What a terrible thing! A real tragedy! We are so sorry for you. You must be very sad. What a terrible thing." The man said, "Perhaps. But you never know."

Later, the horse came back with a beautiful stallion. And now the man had two horses. The people said to the man, "You must be very happy. This is a wonderful thing!" "Perhaps," he said, "but you never know."

Then both of the horses run away. The people all said, "What a terrible thing!" The man responded, "Perhaps, but you never know."

Later the horses return, bringing with them this huge herd of horses. The people were amazed and rejoiced. "This is a wonderful thing!" "Perhaps," said the man, "but you never know."

One day, his son was out riding one of the horses, and he fell and broke his leg. "This is horrible," the people said. "What a terrible thing that has happened." "Perhaps, but you never know," said the man.

About this time, the king was conscripting young men into the army to fight in a war with a neighboring kingdom. But the man's son was exempt because of his injury, sparing him from a most certain death. The people said, "This is a good thing. Extraordinary good fortune." The man responded, "Perhaps... but you never know!"

There is so much hidden work going on about which we are unaware. There are random forces of nature; there are the intentions and choices of others; and there is God—secretly planting seed after seed.

And there's just no telling which will sprout and grow. You never know.

Great work is done while we're asleep. Our lives might have been turned upside down yesterday, and we don't know about it yet. But this we can know: God is with us, accompanying us on this unpredictable adventure, helping us follow the right path.