

A Parable Universe

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1.

Last year during Lent, I started thinking in parables. I don't mean Jesus' parables in scripture, which I love, by the way. I mean the parables that just hit me when I wasn't looking for them and certainly wasn't expecting them. I guess that's appropriate, since the word *parable* literally means "thrown alongside." As in, *boom*: now you don't see it, now you do. One minute you're humming along, everything's normal, and then, without warning, you just collide with some flash of insight, and you know for sure that the kingdom of God has come near and you just saw a piece of it. You don't know why. You don't know how. You're just glad you happened to be paying attention in the moment it broke. Here are some that came to me last spring as Lent slowly unfurled its way toward Easter. (My friend gave me permission to share them with you.)

The kingdom of God . . . is like a group of nurses and orderlies who sing spirituals to the woman who is being transported back to her room in the middle of the night after brain surgery and then who stay by her bed until she falls back to sleep, quietly singing, "I give myself away . . . I give myself away, so you can use me . . ." The next day, they come back to her room, and they teach her the song so she can sing it, too, which she does.

The kingdom of God . . . is like meeting a sassy young saleswoman at the wig shop in Toco Hills, who tenderly guides your friend to a private corner, opens up the boxes, and helps her pick out her first wig for when her hair begins to fall out from the chemo and radiation—and you can't believe it, because the wig's name is "Center Stage" by Raquel Welch—and when you have finished laughing, you see that this young saleswoman has a ministry: to transform that shop into a holy ground of hope.

The kingdom of God . . . is like a husband who organizes a quiet little ceremony three weeks after the surgery, so they can make a ritual of the moment when he puts the ring back on her finger after it was taken off in the hospital—the only time it has left her finger in 30 years. And so the friends gather, and a passel of clergy stand round, and the couple sits down on the couch and takes hands and looks into one another's eyes saying, "I take you, yet again, to be my spouse, and I promise to love you and support you no matter what comes to you until death do us part,"—and they smile, and the friends cry, and the dog barks, and then they all go to the kitchen for a simple feast

of soup and bread and wine, because it is true: the kingdom of God has come near, and people who sat in the darkness of a diagnosis have seen a great light.

Those were some of the parables that flew up to me last spring. Like I said, I wasn't expecting them. But it got me thinking. It made me wonder if maybe living in a *parallel* universe might be the perfect environment for a *parable* universe. Because that's how it felt with my friend, like we'd been plunged into this free fall of space with no gravity, very few tethers, and way too many asteroids streaking around: a parallel universe. In other words, your average day as a preacher. Where any second, you and the ones in your orbit might be broken or obliterated from falling debris, or at least, that's how it feels, and you are required to watch this brokenness happen and then say profound things about it.

A parable universe. What would it be like, I wondered, if my students and I could live in a place like that for a semester? What if we simply assumed that parables were all around us, and our job was to walk around looking for them? And since parables are really sermons in miniature, what would happen, I wondered, if I asked my students to go somewhere unexpected, every week, and to come back with a parable they had witnessed?

So that's what we did. We got out from behind our desks and our iPhones and our comfortable campus and went into the path of freefalling asteroids, where the wild things are, and the parables are waiting to be noticed. Perhaps because it was Lent, it seemed to us that the parables were in bloom everywhere we looked, as if God were saying to us, "Keep alert: my way of reversal is on the move! It's coming!" We started gathering them, and before you knew it, the gathering became a habit, and the habit led to sermons, and our parable universe, which was only supposed to be a classroom exercise, turned into a way of living and speaking, all the way to Easter.

It made a difference in our classroom, which is why I am sharing this story with you. I wonder if it might make a difference for you, too, in your preaching this Lent. What if you invited your congregation to join you in living in a parable universe? What if you all agreed to go out into the world and look for the parables that are waiting to be noticed and blooming everywhere? Would it deepen your Lenten journey to practice this way of God's reversal in your everyday living and speaking?

I noticed that for my students, living in a parable universe helped them change the subject from themselves to God, who is, after all, the subject of all our preaching. They began the semester with the same expectations students have every year, asking, "What is this secret knowledge that you, the teacher, will surely be disclosing to me about how one becomes a preacher of power and might?" And I said the same thing I say every year, "There is no secret knowledge; a preacher is just a person who pays attention to the realm of God breaking in everywhere, and then who looks for words to describe it!" But I also added a layer.

This spring, I told them, you are going to learn to see the world in parables, which you already do: *The kingdom of God . . . is like a sower who went out*

to sow. And, I told them, you are going to learn to speak, perhaps, in some quirky, sassy parables: *The kingdom of God . . . is like a sassy saleswoman in a wig shop in Toco Hills*. And most important, I said, you are going to let the biblical text be your nearest and dearest partner in showing you how to do these things, because it does; it always does.

2.

As a case in point, let us take a text from Matthew 4:12-25. I am glad to tell you, it includes Jesus' first sermon. And it's a simple one: "Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near!" Okay, that's it! Pretty typical for a first sermon, in my experience, in that the preacher has a lot of fervor and passion, but not a lot of illustrative substance, and, as new preachers always do, he has even modeled himself after *his* preaching mentor—in this case, John the Baptizer. Jesus' first sermon is classic John the Baptizer stuff, but it's not his own yet. This is totally normal; this is a stage new preachers have to pass through, and I notice Matthew's discretion in refraining from telling us how Jesus' first sermon was received. In a few verses, there will be crowds following him, gathering for Jesus as there were for John, but not yet, not here. There is something even Jesus has to learn, which is that in order to be a preacher, you have to see the world around you and speak to the people who are in that world, in their language. You have to see where they are sitting in deep darkness.

Jesus goes for a walk by the sea. I've always found it interesting and instructive that when Jesus gets ready to go out in the world to do what God has sent him to do, he doesn't stay at home among the people and professionals he knows. Jesus is a carpenter from Nazareth. Think how easy it would have been to go to the Nazarene Carpenter's Guild and say, "Guys; I need some disciples. Follow me, guys, and I will give you a hammer and nails and make you build the house of God's kingdom, which has come near!" That was his language. Those were his images. But maybe, just maybe, you notice the kingdom of God best when you leave your own backyard and your own town for a time, which is why we send the youth group on mission trips and the children to summer camp, and why the adults sometimes need to go to the other side of town to see more clearly what is right before them.

So Jesus leaves Nazareth, his hometown, and makes his way to the big city, to Capernaum, in Galilee by the sea. It must have been like moving to the big city, with all the new apartment stuff that comes when you leave home for the first time. And instead of hanging out on carpenter row in Capernaum, which might have been the logical thing to do, Jesus just begins to walk the streets; and because this is a fishing town, to walk down by the water, because that is where life happens in a fishing town. And he sees, as we walks, how a sea town functions. To see the fishermen, casting and mending their nets. To listen to the cries of the sea birds and the *slap slap* of the oars against the boat, and the chatter of bartering for your supper at the end of the day, when the fish have been caught and it's time to sell. All new sounds for him.

And I wonder if it gave him some new parables.

The kingdom of God . . . is like a fisherman who sits all night in the boat with his brother, on the hope that a fish will rise.

Or this: The kingdom of God . . . is like a fisherman who sits all day on the beach with his brother, mending a net, because before you can cast it, you have to mend it, you have to take care of what is torn.

Or this: The kingdom of God . . . is like a fisherman who casts his nets all day on one side of the boat and catches nothing, and then as he's finally heading home, out of the blue, making one last tired cast, he suddenly pulls up a net full of fish, one hundred and fifty-three of them, and though there are so many, the net isn't torn at all.

Or this one: The kingdom of God . . . is like a boat on the Sea of Galilee during a storm, when the wind blows and the waves toss, and the fishermen begin to pray in the words of 107th Psalm: "They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; they have seen the works of the Lord, and his wonders in the deep."

Or this: The kingdom of God . . . is like a fisherman selling his catch at the end of the day, hoping he's going to get enough to keep his own family in oil and flour, yet always saving the last two fish for the widow who waits for him at the back of the line, because that is what we do: we care for the least of these, even when we are at our least.

I think those are the kinds of parables that may have come to Jesus as he walked along the Sea of Galilee. Because the next thing you know, he is speaking to Peter and Andrew in their own language. And you know what he says, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

I have to be careful with my students on this one. "Fishing for people" is what many of them think preaching is; it's what they signed up for. And the problem is they're mostly city kids, and their images of fishing are largely what you find on the internet if you google "images of fishing": people on boats holding up enormous fish they've just caught, as they grin for the camera. Big fish caught with big hooks. Crook your finger and put it in your cheek. That is not an awesome metaphor for preaching or for the Christian life, in my view: "follow me, and I'll show you how to hook all the new members you want! I will show you how to figure out what the youth group is biting on! How to bait your education programs so you can reel in new young families, and how to position your nets for the really big fish who will look good on your wall!" See what I mean? Not so appetizing or even appropriate, especially for the fish. Every metaphor has its limits – an "is" and an "is not" – and for good reason, because metaphors are supposed to spark your imagination, not hook and sink you fast. And if you don't know much about fishing, if all you think it's about is a deep sea charter boat and taxidermy displays, you're going to get to the limits of this metaphor much sooner.

But notice, Jesus isn't speaking to city kids from Atlanta. He's talking to fisherman. And he has sat and watched where they sit, in their darkness. And no one sits in darkness like a fisherman. No one waits like a fisherman, for the light to change, for the tide to change; for the moment when the dawn comes, which is, as the writer Norman Maclean says, the moment when everything is luminous and nothing is clear. Jesus is talking to fishermen, and he's been paying attention. And so he speaks in their metaphors. He lets them know he has seen who they are and what they do and how they live and move and have their being. And so his second sermon is much different than his first. Instead of *repent*, he says *follow*. Instead of "the kingdom of God has come near," he *shows* them how it has come near and that they've been seeing pieces of it. And that they have the language to do exactly what he is doing: to speak of how we fish for people. "I will make you do," Jesus says, "what you already know how to do, and I will transform your verbs for the kingdom of God."

A parable universe. I wonder if it was inevitable, what followed, that Jesus would speak to everyone as the scripture says, in parables. I wonder if getting out from behind your desk and your iPhone and your doctrine and your carpenters' guild, leaving your nets and looking for asteroids, simply leads to that universe. Maybe it does. Because everything Jesus says from then on has the ring of a man who is paying very close attention. He sees those holy collisions *everywhere*. And he helps *us* see them.

Imagine this. An afternoon when Jesus is hanging out with farmers, listening to them talk about the weather or the crops or the new ploughs or their bizarre neighbor who never sows his seed properly, but just throws it every which way, so of course he loses most of it to the birds or the thorns or the hard ground. What a foolish farmer he is. And Jesus pipes up, "You know, the kingdom of God is like that: a sower who went out to sow. And some of his seed fell on the path, and some of it fell among thorns, and some of it was scorched by the sun, but some of it fell into good soil, and it grew bigger than anyone expected: a hundredfold. If you've got ears to hear that one, listen up!"

Or another afternoon, talking to shepherds, hearing them complain about the new fellow, rather dim, embarrassingly tender-hearted, who recently committed the cardinal sin of all shepherds, which is to leave the flock untended while he went looking for one stray lamb; can you believe the idiocy? I don't know how his parents can even walk into the market. And Jesus chiming in, "But there's something beautiful in that, guys. The kingdom of good sense may be the one where you leave the few to protect the most. But the kingdom of God is like a shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep to search for one that's lost, and when he finds it, he doesn't apologize; he rejoices! If you have ears to hear, ears that aren't full of wool that is, hear!"

Or some night at dinner, when his elegant host begins gossiping about another Pharisee in town, a man who was foolish enough to spoil his younger son and then take him back after he'd dishonored the family, which anyone could have predicted, given the fact that the boy had never been disciplined a day in his life; *of course* he was headed for trouble and dissolute living. And Jesus listens quietly, and then speaks up: "In the realm of Herod, we are pun-

ished for our sins. In the realm of Caesar, we are punished despite our sins. But in the realm of God, there are many foolish Pharisees who are ready to forgive beyond all that we can imagine. Let me tell you a story. There was a man who had two sons."

Or Jesus in Bethany, watching his friend Martha knead mountains of dough as she prepares the bread for tonight's dinner: sixteen around the table, since all the disciples are in town too, and you know those men can eat like oxen; swine, too: just sayin'. So she's stressed, covered in flour, slapping loaf after loaf onto the coals, and Jesus says, smiling, "Martha, Martha; do you know the kingdom of God is just like you, right now, a woman who took a measure of leaven and hid it in a mountain of flour until it leavened every inch of that bread? Oh, we are going to feast tonight. And it's going to be a taste of the heavenly banquet!"

We could go on and on. You start living in the parable universe, and everything is a story. Everything is a segue to the realm of God, breaking in right here in the kitchen and the house and the field and the pasture, right where we live and breathe and having our being, where Jesus is waiting to show us that grace happens, y'all. It happens every day. And when you see something, say something; that's what being a disciple is about: when you see something, say something! Name it and proclaim it and share it every which way. Grace happens when the unlikeliest things crash into each other and break open into new meaning.

A parable universe is about ordinary things. Because every parable Jesus ever told begins with the words, "The kingdom of GOD is like a man, just an ordinary man. The realm of GOD is like a woman, just an ordinary woman. But they saw the world in an extraordinary way," as if Jesus is reminding us that what makes for an extraordinary life is distinguishing between realms. Who you gonna serve: the kingdom of Herod, or the Kingdom of Heaven? The realm of Caesar, or the realm of God? That makes every parable a segue. The kingdom of Herod may be like a man who disowns his failure of a son, but the kingdom of GOD is like a man who runs to meet that son when he returns home. The realm of Caesar may be like an army that sacrifices the few to protect the many, but the realm of GOD is like a shepherd who left the whole flock to find the one that was lost.

Wherever you are, wherever you preach, this is Jesus' call to you. Because the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. And the people who sat in darkness: on them light has shined. On you light has shined. And you have seen it. So go tell it.