

Semicontinuous

1 Sam. 15:34–16:13

Ps. 20

Complementary

Ezek. 17:22–24

Ps. 92:1–4, 12–15

2 Cor. 5:6–10, 14–17

Mark 4:26–34

# God's Reign

## Goal for the Session

Adults will open their imaginations and discipleship to the mystery of God's reign unveiled through Jesus' parables.

## ■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

### Focus on Mark 4:26–34

#### WHAT is important to know?

— From "Exegetical Perspective," Judith Hoch Wray

Verse 28. The earth produces "of itself" (*automatē*, from which we derive "automatic"). In the OT and later Jewish texts, the term referred to that which was worked by God alone, without human effort. An ongoing theological debate among Jewish and Christian thinkers has continued from Jesus' time until now: Does the coming of the final redemption depend on God's will alone, or does human effort make a difference? Mark asserts that while humans are called to "sow" or to "scatter the seed," the growth is completely up to God. The fulfillment comes in stages—first . . . , then . . . , then . . . For now, the one who scatters does not understand the process and can only wait patiently.

#### WHERE is God in these words?

— From "Theological Perspective," Wendy Farley

Our difficulty arises in confusing the way of the kingdom with our ordinary way of doing things. Jesus is calling us to a very different way of being with ourselves, with one another, with the divine, by asking us to recognize that spiritual growth and intimacy with God arises as naturally as seeds growing. The harvest will come without us having to work for it, because God adores us and it is this love that is the power of growth. It is this love that transforms the tiniest and most impotent-looking seed into a lush bush that gives rest and shade to the singing birds.

#### SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From "Pastoral Perspective," Don E. Saliers

We do well to continue pondering the inexhaustible range of meanings these stories of Jesus about the kingdom generate. The saving act of God in Jesus Christ remains both revealed and veiled to us in this life, just as it remained so for the first communities. To follow this teller of parables is to become alive to all the paradoxes and the tensions of his life and death: goodness appears in human form, and human powers are threatened; yet death leads to life. We struggle to understand while yet standing under the signs of God's offer of life.

#### NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From "Homiletical Perspective," Nibs Stroupe

There is also an emphasis on the mystery and surprise of God. We live in an age when the mystery and surprise of all of life, including God's power, are being squeezed out of our consciousness. This parable asks us not to close our imaginations too quickly, because there is a dynamic, vital power that is mysteriously beyond our comprehension and our grasp. In this parable, Jesus suggests that history has been made ready, just as fields are readied to be planted. The world has been made ready, and now God's reign has burst on the stage of history in the life of Jesus.

**FOCUS SCRIPTURE**

**Mark 4:26–34**

## Focus on Your Teaching

Many adults struggle to see signs of God's reign in a world filled with so much war and situations that seem to contradict such hope. Some may ask why God's work in the world is not more obvious. Many grow impatient when efforts to bear witness to that reign appear to have little consequence. Some may find the lack of clear-cut answers troubling while others may welcome the opportunity to imagine what might be. Today's session explores two parables that invite imagination to discern the mysterious nature of God's reign among us.

*God of wisdom and wonder, grant me an abundance of both as I prepare and lead this session. Amen.*

### YOU WILL NEED

- newsprint
- markers
- work table
- paper cups
- potting soil
- packets of small seeds (ideally, plants that grow in your region)
- spray bottle with water
- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for June 21, 2015

### For Responding

- option 1: paper, pens
- option 3: copies of Resource Sheet 2

## LEADING THE SESSION

### GATHERING

*Before the session*, post one or more sheets of newsprint with a line drawn down the center. Title the left side "Mystery" and the right side "Imagination." Write the following questions under each title: *What is a mystery that intrigues you about life?* and *How does imagination help you think about that mystery?* Set several markers beneath the newsprint. Place paper cups, potting soil, seeds, and spray bottle on a work table.

Welcome participants as they arrive. Introduce any guests or newcomers.

Direct attention to the posted newsprint. Invite adults to consider the questions and then write their responses on the newsprint in the appropriate columns. Invite participants to identify briefly connections they see between the entries, especially in the roles imagination is seen to play.

Affirm that today's focus scripture engages the imagination in discerning and responding to the mystery of God's realm.

Say this prayer or one of your choosing:

*Before we invoke, you are here, O God. Before we ask, you know. Lead us in this time together and teach us as we explore your Word. Amen.*

### EXPLORING

Explain that today's reading of the focus scripture will involve some "hands-on" activity coupled with listening. Instruct adults to go in silence to the work table, fill a cup with potting soil, select several seeds, and return with them to their seats. As they do this, read aloud Mark 4:26–29. (You may need to repeat the reading one or more times, depending on how long it takes the participants.)

A *parable* is a story that illustrates a principle or truth. Jesus often spoke in parables, using everyday images and scenarios to explain unseen mysteries and truths.

Once everyone has returned to their seats, have participants listen as you read Mark 4:30–32. After this reading, invite adults to keep these words in mind as they plant the seeds in the soil. When this is done, read aloud Mark 4:33–34.

Invite participants to identify thoughts sparked by the readings, as well as words or phrases that stood out. Clarify, if need be, the meaning of the word *parable*.

Form two groups. Assign each group one of the parables Jesus tells here, along with verses 33–34. Ask each group to discuss the following questions:

- ✧ What mysteries or surprises about God's reign does the parable reveal?
- ✧ If you could ask Jesus one question about this parable, what would it be?
- ✧ If you had been a person in the crowd that day, what would this parable convey to you about the nature of discipleship?

Gather the groups together. Have each group report on their discussions of these three questions. Afterward, compare and contrast those responses to each of the parables.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Mark 4:26–34) and have a volunteer read the “What?” excerpt aloud to the group. Call attention to its debate proposition:

*Does the coming of the final redemption depend on God's will alone, or does human effort make a difference?*

Designate one side of the room as “God's will alone,” and the opposite side of the room as “human effort makes a difference,” and the space between as various degrees of conviction. Have adults stand in the room according to their beliefs. Then divide the room in half to create two groups representing similar convictions. Give each group a pen and paper and direct them to draw primary evidence for their arguments from the two parables. They should write the most compelling argument to read to the whole group. Since each group may have more folks toward the middle than the extreme, assure them that their argument can be nuanced.

Have each group read their sentence to the whole group. Then discuss how these parables reinforce the mystery of how God's reign relies on God's grace and human discipleship. Invite a volunteer to read the “So What?” excerpt aloud to the group. Discuss:

- ✧ Imagine yourself present when Jesus said these words. Does the fact that God's realm is both revealed and veiled to us comfort or disturb you more? Explain.

To transition to Responding, read the “Now What?” excerpt from the resource sheet. Ask adults to reflect on its emphasis on the exercise of imagination in discerning the reign of God among us. Note that Jesus exercised such imagination in communicating the meaning of that reign in parables drawn from everyday life in his era. Ask:

- ✧ As disciples, how can we communicate the reign of God in imagery and actions that speak to people in our context?

**EASY  
PREP**

Adding a parable expressed in art form is but one option for creativity that is possible here. Depending on your group, consider other options: a sacred dance, a pantomime, sculpting (you will need to provide materials), or others.

## RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session.

- 1. Living Parables of God's Reign** Our witness to the mystery of God's reign invites us to "translate" Jesus' parables of old into contemporary images and discipleship. Distribute paper and pens. Invite each participant to create a parable of the mystery of God's reign whose imagery is drawn from their daily life. Clarify that the parable could be told in words or a drawing. Allow volunteers to read their parable with the group. Encourage adults to tell their parables in the coming week to someone not in this group.
- 2. Imagination** Jesus' imaginative use of parables to convey the mystery of God's reign beckons us to employ our imaginations in recognizing that mystery unfolding among us. Invite adults to imagine themselves as first-century disciples transported to this time. What might be seen as evidence of God's reign unfolding from their time to ours? Next, invite adults to imagine themselves transported one hundred years into the future. Discuss how developments from our time to that time might be interpreted then as witness to God's reign unfolding. Challenge adults to commit to one action in the coming week that might help affect God's future reign.
- 3. Sowing Seeds** We participate as disciples in the unfolding of God's reign by patiently and hopefully sowing seeds that embody its qualities. Distribute and read copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Sowing Seeds of God's Reign). Invite participants to choose one of the "Seeds of . . ." options. Group those who choose the same option to work together in order to identify and commit to one action as individuals and/or a group that will sow that seed in the coming week.

## CLOSING

Have adults bring the cups in which they planted seeds and form a circle. Invite participants to reflect on this session and offer a single phrase or sentence about what it means to be a disciple in the light of God's reign. Encourage adults to view these seeds they have planted as symbols of that reign and their discipleship.

Step into the center of the circle with the spray bottle of water. Invite adults to imagine the water inside as a symbol of both God's unseen working and the gift of community that combine to bring life to God's reign. Go around the circle, and spray the water inside each participant's cup of soil and seeds. As you do, offer this benediction: *Go, and grow, in the mystery of God's reign.*

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for June 21, 2015, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

## Focus on Mark 4:26–34

### WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Judith Hoch Wray

*Verse 28.* The earth produces “of itself” (*automatē*, from which we derive “automatic”). In the OT and later Jewish texts, the term referred to that which was worked by God alone, without human effort. An ongoing theological debate among Jewish and Christian thinkers has continued from Jesus’ time until now: Does the coming of the final redemption depend on God’s will alone, or does human effort make a difference? Mark asserts that while humans are called to “sow” or to “scatter the seed,” the growth is completely up to God. The fulfillment comes in stages—first . . . , then . . . , then . . . For now, the one who scatters does not understand the process and can only wait patiently.

### WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Wendy Farley

Our difficulty arises in confusing the way of the kingdom with our ordinary way of doing things. Jesus is calling us to a very different way of being with ourselves, with one another, with the divine, by asking us to recognize that spiritual growth and intimacy with God arises as naturally as seeds growing. The harvest will come without us having to work for it, because God adores us and it is this love that is the power of growth. It is this love that transforms the tiniest and most impotent-looking seed into a lush bush that gives rest and shade to the singing birds.

### SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Don E. Saliers

We do well to continue pondering the inexhaustible range of meanings these stories of Jesus about the kingdom generate. The saving act of God in Jesus Christ remains both revealed and veiled to us in this life, just as it remained so for the first communities. To follow this teller of parables is to become alive to all the paradoxes and the tensions of his life and death: goodness appears in human form, and human powers are threatened; yet death leads to life. We struggle to understand while yet standing under the signs of God’s offer of life.

### NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,”

*Nibs Stroupe*

There is also an emphasis on the mystery and surprise of God. We live in an age when the mystery and surprise of all of life, including God’s power, are being squeezed out of our consciousness. This parable asks us not to close our imaginations too quickly, because there is a dynamic, vital power that is mysteriously beyond our comprehension and our grasp. In this parable, Jesus suggests that history has been made ready, just as fields are readied to be planted. The world has been made ready, and now God’s reign has burst on the stage of history in the life of Jesus.

## Sowing Seeds of God's Reign

Jesus uses the imagery of seeds in both of today's parables to provide insights into the reign of God. The first parable in particular bids patient expectation that exercises trust in God's often unseen workings to bring the growth of that reign. But make no mistake: the parable does *not* make patient expectation equivalent to twiddling our thumbs and doing nothing in the meantime. We respond to the God whose reign unfolds in mysterious ways by sowing seeds that witness to and embody the qualities of that reign. We do not force the growth God brings—rather, our lives participate in that growth by living now in the light of that reign.

Imagine what seeds of God's reign might you sow.

