



The Kingdom

The symbol for *The Kingdom* is a grain of wheat, representing the seed sown by the sower. (Mark 4:1-20)

The Story Continues

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"
Matthew 18:1

Jesus preaches and teaches about the Kingdom of God in everything he says and does, yet his message is difficult to fully understand. In response to the disciples' misguided question, Jesus embraces and places a child in the center of their group as if to say that the answer should be clear. In teaching his disciples to pray, Jesus instructs them to pray "your kingdom come."

Jesus' challenge is to transform the common understanding of a kingdom in order to help people anticipate, welcome, and respond to God's coming Kingdom. For whenever Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God, those in the crowds picture another kingdom in their minds. They think back to the majestic kingdom of their ancestors, King David and King Solomon, and imagine glory, wealth, and power. They also think about the present might of the Roman Empire and neighboring rival kingdoms.

It is difficult to express the fullness of God's Kingdom with words. Jesus teaches about the Kingdom of God by making comparisons with objects that people see, and to situations that people experience, saying "the Kingdom of God is like..." These sayings and parables help put the Kingdom of God into pictures so people can envision a new awareness of its reality.

Jesus further clarifies the meaning of the Kingdom of God in healing, praying, touching, forgiving, and preaching, yet his message is only partly understood. Even Pilate,

at Jesus' trial, interrogates him about his kingdom. It seems that Jesus' efforts to transform people's perception from an earthly kingdom to an understanding of God's Kingdom are incomplete or ineffective. Preaching and teaching are not enough. God will have to act in a new way.

Preparing for the Search

In reading the passages selected for *The Kingdom*, the descriptions of two terms are especially important:

Leaven is a fermenting agent similar to yeast. An unbaked portion of a previous batch of bread is added to the fresh ingredients to make the dough rise. In the Bible leaven sometimes represents evil (Mark 8:15); at other times, as in the Parable of the Leaven, it represents growth. (Matthew 13:33)

Mustard Seed. In the Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31-32), Jesus is quoted as saying that the mustard seed is "the smallest of all the seeds." Yet it develops into a tree-like shrub. This hyperbole emphasizes that from small beginnings God's Kingdom will grow.

The Search Begins

The word "kingdom" occurs in each of the following passages. Sometimes it is part of the phrases "Kingdom of God" or "Kingdom of Heaven." At other times it is used without those additional words, but the intent is the same. Take notes that help you retell the story of *The Kingdom*. Consider these questions in your reading and note taking:

- ◆ *What are some of the ways Jesus described The Kingdom?*
- ◆ *How did Jesus attempt to transform the people's understanding of kingdom?*
- ◆ *When/where/what is The Kingdom?*

Matthew 9:35-38, Good News of the Kingdom

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52, Parables of the Kingdom

Matthew 18:1-5, Who's the Greatest?

Mark 4:1-20, The Parable of the Sower

Mark 10:13-16, Jesus and the Children

Mark 15:1-15, Jesus before Pilate

Luke 10:1-12, Jesus Sends His Followers

Luke 11:1-13, Your Kingdom Come

Luke 13:22-30, The Narrow Door

Luke 14:15-24, Parable of a Dinner

The Search Continues

◆ *In these readings I have questions about...*

◆ *In these readings I discovered...*

Focusing the Search

Those who read the Gospels are sometimes surprised when they discover the same event or story being told in different ways. In *Listening to Scripture*, Richard L. Rohrbaugh writes,

As we turn to the Bible, it is important to remember that much of what is in the Scriptures began as oral communication. Very few persons in biblical times could read, and most of what was passed along had to be shared orally and remembered. Living in a highly literate culture, we sometimes forget that the books of the Bible were originally meant to be read aloud to those who could not read for themselves (See 2 Kings 23:2 and Revelation 1:3).

... Oral communication is, however, more fluid than written texts. Stories are difficult to retell in exactly the same way each time. Different storytellers use different gestures, give different emphases to key words, or make word choices that color meanings differently.

Jesus' parables were, above all, oral communication. They were meant to be heard and remembered. But the situations in which they were later shared by early Christians inevitably shaped how they were understood. ... Each retelling of the story was an occasion for transmitting what had been heard before and for allowing it to be heard and remembered in a new setting.⁵

In "The Search Begins" you read Jesus' Parable of the Sower as told in Mark's Gospel. The same parable is also recounted in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. As you might suspect, each tells the story in a distinctive way. Compare these passages from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Underline all of the words and phrases that are the same or similar in both.

Mark 4:1-9

Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

Matthew 13:1-9

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the

⁵Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Listening to Scripture: Strategies for Interpreting the Bible* (Pittsburgh: the Kerygma Program, 2007), 34.

sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!”

Luke 8:4-8

When a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable: “A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold.” As he said this, he called out, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

What did you discover from this exercise?

On another sheet of paper, write the Parable of the Sower in your own words without looking back at the passages above.

Putting it Together

Throughout his life and ministry Jesus is known by many names and is addressed by many titles. One popular title given to him, “Lord,” indicates his rule and his Kingdom. Read the passages below to discover some of the most frequently used names and titles. Write those you find on the lines next to the passages on the following page.

NAMES AND TITLES FOR JESUS

Matthew 14:33

Matthew 16:16

Matthew 26:49

Mark 1:24

Mark 2:10

Luke 2:11

Luke 11:1

Luke 18:18

John 1:1,14

John 1:29

John 1:41

John 10:11

John 20:16

Reflection

1. Jesus told his followers, "...do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' ... But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:31, 33)

What does it mean to you to "strive first for the kingdom of God"? What does that striving look like in your own life?

2. Once again consider Jesus' Parable of the Sower, Mark 4:1-20. What may have prompted Jesus to tell this parable? What seems to be the most important in the story: the seed, the soil, or the growth? What does the parable say to you about living as a disciple of Jesus Christ?