

God's Kingdom Insurgency

1 Samuel 16: 1-13 Mark 4: 26-34

People have mixed feelings about Edward Snowden, the geeky young man who worked for a National Security Agency contractor, who stole and published classified documents, exposing many secret operations of the US intelligence community, including many embarrassing ones. Foreign heads of state were quite upset that their personal phone conversations had been eavesdropped and recorded by US intelligence. The chancellor of Germany and the president of Brazil were deeply insulted. We learned about the cover-ups, the vast collection of personal data from US citizens, the co-opting of communications companies and data servers, and loads more.

Some think Edward Snowden is a hero, offering the nation a unique chance to see what out-of-control measures had been taken, which often had been hidden from overseers like Congress. Thanks to Snowden, there is incontrovertible, albeit uncomfortable, truth about the uncontrolled, renegade nature of US intelligence.

Others think Snowden is a traitor, and the government in particular would like to see him captured and punished. He should have used other lawful means to bring about a correction of these systematic violations. He endangered US interests, US intelligence assets – people-assets as well as technical assets– and covert operations.

Regardless of opinions about Snowden, both Republicans and Democrats in Congress have become a lot more thoughtful and circumspect when it comes to re-authorizing things like the Patriot Act and other intelligence gathering authorizations. What Snowden revealed was plentiful evidence that Congress had been ignored, manipulated, and even lied to by US intelligence agencies, again.

And let's remember who Edward Snowden was; a young geeky, dweeb analyst with security clearance, working for an NSA contractor. He was a nobody among a small army of nobodies, toiling at a terminal, processing and generating reports for the insatiable, voracious intelligence machine of the US government. Yet look who became a world class celebrity, sought after throughout the world, someone who could change the course of history. The dweeb. Who saw that one coming? Not the US intelligence community!

60 Minutes did a segment on the guy who sent dozens of mobsters to prison, having spent years wearing a wire for the FBI, gathering evidence. Who was he? He was an accountant who ran a nightclub and dealt with all kinds of shady business. He got a reduced sentence for his cooperation with the FBI, but he also got exposed. Who was this guy who rocked and ruined the mob? A pudgy, bespeckled bean counter in a suit. The mob guys never suspected, because if they had, he would have been dead. They never saw this one coming.

What God is doing in the world is hardly evident at times. We're often caught unawares. We never see it coming. We don't have imaginations big enough to embrace

the vision, the grace, the majesty, the beauty, or the love of God. We hear this business that God is busily conducting in secret, on the sly, undercover, unbeknownst to the people in the know. It's a subversive routine reflecting the kingdom's quiet insurgency occurring all around the players.

In the reading from First Samuel, we hear once again the familiar story of choosing a new king. The failures of the first king over God's people, of Saul, are painfully obvious for all. God is well in front of the curve, moving to identify the replacement, the next king. God brings his word to Samuel and charges him with the task of anointing the next king.

Clearly, God is out ahead of the curve, way ahead of Samuel who protests: *How can I go? If Saul hears about this, he'll kill me!* God has a solution; 'You lie a little.' God says: *Take a heifer with you, and say, "I have come to sacrifice to the Lord." Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I'll show you whatcha do; and you anoint for me the one I name.* 'Capiche?' Even commentators evade the obvious, that God is helping Samuel in a deceit, in a lie. They slide around with this God-lying business like it's a greased pig. God tells Samuel to lie; get over it.

Samuel heads off to Bethlehem, probably wondering what he's going to say when someone asks why he came to Bethlehem of all places to make a 'sacrifice to the Lord.' Fortunately, the elders in Bethlehem are too scared to see the important guy from Jerusalem coming to their town to ask any question than, *Do you come in peace?* He says yes, and tells them the line about coming there 'to make a sacrifice unto the Lord.' True, it isn't a lie; there will be a sacrifice made to the Lord once the next king has been anointed, but he does omit the primary mission of finding the next king.

Next comes the beauty pageant. All of Jesse's mature sons are lined up, one better looking, stronger looking, bearing more regally than the next. Easy peasy, Samuel thinks. He checks out the first stud, thinking, 'Surely this is the one.' Not so, says the Lord God. *Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.*

None of the sons in the lineup are approved by God. What now? Samuel asks, *Is this all of your sons?* There's the surprise kid, shepherd boy out with the sheep. Get him! says Samuel.

The Lord looks on the heart, not the appearance, remember? And the text says of young David, *Now David was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome.* Clearly the editor of the text didn't pick up on the little nuance of what God was looking for since no mention is made of his heart, his spirit, his devotion – nothing.

The point is that God confounds what passes as popular (and therefore correct, proper, standard, official) opinion. The important one is not the obvious choice. The important one is the one you never suspected. The one who will change everything is right in front of you. As you dwell on that realization that God uses the one whom God

wants, and it could be anybody when you think about it, then you also realize that the one whom God would call to change everything could be you ... it is you. No, really, it is you. You are God's secret agent, a witness to the insurgency of the Kingdom that seeks to bring love, life, hope and peace into the sinful, deadly, limited, despairing world. You are God's secret agent, God's secret weapon.

This is very helpful to know when we come to read the two similar parables in Mark 4. Each one refers to the kingdom of God. We must be careful to remember the phrasing of the question because that sets the context. Both questions seek to describe the kingdom of God.

Here's the first one: *The kingdom of God is like someone who may scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, though he does not know how.* Let's note right off that this is somebody, not a sower, not a farmer, not someone who is acting purposefully like they expected **anything** to happen. This is Jack. He's a jerk. He hasn't done much of anything, doesn't know much of anything, and therefore no one expects much of anything from Jack. But Jack gets this special bean or seed. Jack drops the bean on the ground and, being a jerk, walks off and forgets about it. He goes to bed, wakes up, and – boom! – there is this massive awesome beanstalk that has grown overnight. He didn't do anything because he's a jerk and wouldn't know what to do. Incredibly, this gigantic beanstalk has grown, and it's a sure bet that Jack has no idea how it happened, and did nothing to make it happen. Does this story sound at all familiar?

This is what the kingdom of God is like, right? It doesn't describe any particular qualities of the kingdom of God; that happens in other places in the gospel. This is how the kingdom of God appears and manifests itself. It starts in this insignificant way, and – wham! – overnight (it seems) there has been this remarkable thing that has happened and it's pointless to try figuring out how it happened. It describes the insurgency of God's kingdom. And suddenly, it's gone from seed to harvest-ready, the time of fulfillment. Just remember, Jack, the jerk, was asleep through the whole thing and only woke up when the work of the kingdom was finished. Sleep wisely, my friend.

Here's the second one, still working on the Kingdom of God, still working on the theme of seed. *With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.*

The emphasis here is on the very tiny nature of the mustard seed. Frankly, it doesn't typically grow into much of a plant. It may grow to 6-7 feet tall, but it's rather wispy and couldn't support much of anything. To suggest that it grew large branches that could support birds certainly doesn't describe a mustard plant. Tiny birds perhaps could be supported, but the whole parable seems a bit off. The greatest shrub? It doesn't quite follow the outstanding nature of the preceding parable.

But if we look a bit, we can find a better version. In Luke 13 (:18-19), the mustard seed grows into a tree. This bothers scholars no end who insist that a mustard seed could not grow into anything resembling a tree, surely a gross exaggeration. True, a gross exaggeration, but one which would fit Mark's context perfectly. Mark's first story was precisely about a gross exaggeration, the Jack and the beanstalk-like story. And yes, birds could make their home in such a ridiculously large tree ... that came from a mere mustard seed. Mark's story was "improved" with "the largest of shrubs," but by making it more realistic, it also lost the fantastic aspect which the parable sought to portray.

It is the story of the improbable, unexpected, undercover work of the kingdom that we need to hear. It is the story of the shepherd boy who was never seriously considered except by God, the seed that even Jack the jerk tossed off that preposterously grew into an amazing plant overnight, ready for harvest, the tiny mustard seed that grows into a majestic tree where the angels of good news – the birds – come to make their home. The kingdom of God is an insurgent force unleashed on the world to do God's will.

It is little people doing little things that God gathers up in sacred and spiritual power and makes into great people and great things. It is God's insurgent method for bringing the sinful world to the blessing of the good news. It is God's quiet, undercover movement that incarnates love and grace, justice and peace, compassion and healing, new life and sacred purpose to the world that has no room and no time and no interest in such things. It is you and I in the backwater of Fairfield who carry on the insurgency, the mustard seeds who make miracles happen. That should be the vision we have of ourselves and of the Lord's work in ministry that happens through us. We simply need to be faithful and listen and act when God calls us to be partners in his insurgent kingdom.