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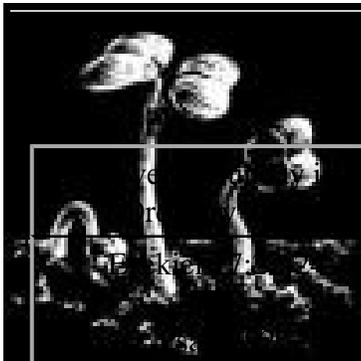
God's holy remnant

by Roger Karban

Scripture for Life

Most biblical prophets eventually develop low expectations. Very few people listen to them; fewer still are willing to change their lives because of the prophets' message.

At this point, the term remnant enters their preaching.



Active during Israel's Babylonian exile in the sixth century B.C., Ezekiel is

confident the chosen people will one day return to the promised land. But he's also confident their return won't be as usual. As we hear in today's first reading, things will be different. [Yahweh] will take from the crest of the cedar, from its topmost branches tear off a tender shoot, and plant it on a lofty mountain; on the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it.?

This small shoot -- this remnant -- will grow into a faith the old tree could never produce. All people will benefit from its shade and find security in its branches. For both Ezekiel and his prophetic predecessor Jeremiah, real change demanded the destruction of the old institution and a determination to start from

scratch.

The historical Jesus certainly identifies with the ancient prophets' insight about the remnant. It isn't just what he says that leads to that conclusion; it's how he says it. He teaches in parables.

We employ parables only when we're trying to retool someone's mindset. Parables don't provide new information; they change the way one processes all information.

Against this background, Mark presents us with two "kingdom of God" parables. Though easy to understand, many of us probably don't know what Jesus means by kingdom of God, or how it demands we change the way we look at reality.

Preachers would benefit from reading Marcus Borg's latest book, *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power -- and How They Can Be Restored*. Borg addresses a basic problem: Many of the biblical words and phrases we employ in our prayers and homilies don't have the meaning our sacred authors intended. The "kingdom of God" is a classic example. It's the first proclamation Jesus makes: "The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the good news." Surfacing God's kingdom demands a totally different way of looking at reality.

Those who believe that Jesus came only to get us into heaven usually equate God's kingdom with the place we're hoping to inhabit after our physical death. Yet scholars tell us this phrase refers to God working effectively in our lives right here and now. The historical Jesus conceived of his ministry as helping us experience God's all-pervasive presence in every person we meet, in every situation we encounter. Just one catch: unless we repent (another of Borg's misunderstood words) we'll never have that experience.

The repentance Jesus speaks of is more than just being sorry for what I did and promising never to do it again. This "metanoia" refers to an entire change of my value system: a 180-degree turn in what I judge important.

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Not only will repentance enable us to experience God working in our lives, it'll also provide us with patience to "hang in there" when it seems God's presence is changing nothing. That's where today's two Gospel parables come in.

Paul's realization of just how much patience the risen Jesus was demanding from him prompts one of Christianity's best-known tenets: "We walk by faith and not by sight." Borg says, "In English, prior to 1600, the verb believe always had a person as its direct object, not a statement. ... [It's] what we mean when we say to somebody, 'I believe in you.' ? Paul would like to 'go home to the Lord.' But in the meantime, his relationship with the risen Jesus -- present and working in his daily life -- calms his natural anxiety.

How many people will commit themselves to a lifetime of searching for God's kingdom in their midst? Most Christians would rather concentrate on the dos and don'ts of morality, avoid hell, and one day get into heaven. But the small remnant in which the Spirit of Jesus takes root will eventually change this world in the ways Jesus knew it could be changed.

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