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This Sunday, the church returns to simple ordinary time. Since Feb. 17, we've observed Lent, celebrated Eastertime, and then finished by riding the wake of the two major feasts that follow Pentecost. Yet, even as our liturgical calendar announces that we're headed for ordinariness, we remain stuck, longing for liberation from the bizarre period that began on March 11, 2020, when COVID-19 was officially declared a global pandemic. By now, we've been doing this for so long that we might be hard pressed to articulate the meaning of "ordinary" or "normal."

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Ezekiel 17:22-24

Psalms 92

2 Corinthians 5:6-10

Mark 4:26-34

It's too soon to figure out what we have learned from our pandemic; nevertheless, today's readings may help us ease out of the mindsets of our anomalous social life and the high celebrations of the past nine weeks. In tune with the summer season starting in the northern hemisphere, today's liturgy invites us to pause and appreciate the simple, extraordinary processes of creation. Today's selection from the Gospel of Mark includes the only parable that no other Gospel repeats: the seed which grows on its own.

First of all, a word about this Gospel. Mark actually invented the literary genre we call "gospel" for people suffering persecution. Mark's community had thought the end of the world was at hand and were deeply shaken by Christ's delay in returning. Added to that, their faith proclaimed that the just would flourish like palm trees; instead, Christians were being martyred in Rome and rejected in Jerusalem. These ugly, incomprehensible realities created a perfect seedbed for serious misgivings.

Were the Christians as misguided as their Jewish sisters and brothers claimed? Had they been taken in by a fanatical sect? Mark, the first evangelist, wrote to respond to a community beset by danger and these doubts.

The parable of the seed which grows by itself offers an antidote to pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps scenarios that preach that the harder you work, the more God will love and reward you. In contrast to suggesting that our goal is to succeed or even to please God, this parable focuses on the divine power that perpetually bursts forth, giving life to the seeds of the kingdom of God. The farmer in this parable does nothing more than plant. After that, everything mysteriously emanates from God.

Addressed to a community physically threatened and plagued by the doubts arising from unmet expectations, the parable of the seed harkens back to Job's losing argument with God. It reminds the faithful that they don't cause the tides to roll, the sun to rise, or the seed to sprout. This parable pushes the listeners to remember that God's ways are not theirs; therefore, they are called to trust God beyond the limits of their understanding. Paul told the Corinthians as much when he said, "We walk by faith, not by sight."

Mark published this parable for a disillusioned, frightened community. His point was not to tell them to sit back and do nothing, but to remember how prodigious and life-giving divine power is. Finally, to lighten their spirits in the midst of heartbreaking concerns, Mark tells us that Jesus underlined the point of the parable with the mischievous analogy of the mustard seed.

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Pious renditions that wax long about the comparison between tiny seed and the wonderful plant that is home to birds' nests often miss the humor of this story. Mustard bushes were invasive weeds. A farmer would no more sow mustard than parents would uncap 15 tubes of toothpaste for a 2-year-old to play with while her twin unraveled a Costco-sized package of rolls of toilet paper. The inevitably ensuing bathroom disaster is a modern equivalent of the agricultural image Jesus conjured by suggesting that a farmer would plant mustard. He described a scene of utterly

prolific chaos.

Mark repeated this parable to help his community stand in the midst of chaos and believe that an incomprehensible mystery was germinating out of sight and very near them. Like them, we are invited simply to trust the divine dynamic at play in our environment, accepting that there are moments when we are powerless to do anything more than plant whatever seed we have, then go on, sleeping and rising, night and day.

As we enter into this summer, hoping that this time will herald the end of COVID-19, the liturgy invites us to imitate the farmer of Jesus' least popular parable and watch for the wonders God is working — hidden in plain sight. We can no more predict what the harvest will be than we can cause its growth. This is how it is with the kingdom of God.

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