SERMON · MT. CALVARY LUTHERAN CHURCH, SANTA CRUZ AREA

The Kingdom Is Already Here: You Just Have to Notice It

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost · July 26, 2026
Readings: 1 Kings 3:5–12 · Psalm 119:129–136 · Romans 8:26–39 · Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52

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I. Opening

Before I say anything else this morning, I want to ask you a question — and I actually want to hear your answers.

What was the highlight of your week?

Go ahead. You can call it out, or if you'd rather just hold it quietly, that's fine too — but I'd love to hear a few of you.

Thank you — notice what we just heard. A trip. A visit. Something that happened, something with a beginning and an end, something you could point to on a calendar and say: *that.*

Here's what I'd bet almost none of us reached for: the way the light came through the kitchen window on Tuesday morning while the coffee was brewing. The exact second your breathing slowed down after a hard conversation. The sound of a page turning. A moment where you weren't doing anything or getting anywhere — you were just *there*.

That's not an accident, and it's not new, either — though our phones certainly haven't helped, training us to sort our own lives into a feed of postable highlights before we've even finished living them. But this pattern is much older than social media. We are trained — culturally, relentlessly, for as long as there have been human beings — to measure our lives in events, achievements, and things we can list.

And today's readings, together, are quietly making the case that this habit of attention might be exactly backwards. That the kingdom of heaven — the thing Jesus keeps trying to describe in parable after parable — isn't found in the highlight reel at all. It's found in what

we walk past on the way to it.

II. Solomon's Strange Request

Our first reading gives us a king who is handed the highlight reel on a silver platter — and turns it down.

Solomon has just inherited the throne. He's young, he's untested, and one night at Gibeon, God appears to him in a dream and says, essentially: *ask for anything.* This is the cosmic blank check. Long life. Riches. The defeat of his enemies. Nothing is off the table.

And Solomon asks for none of it. He asks, instead, for what the Hebrew literally calls a *lev shomea* — a listening heart. Our translation renders it "an understanding mind," which is fine, but it flattens something important. Solomon isn't asking to be *smart.* He's asking to be able to *hear* — to discern, to notice, to perceive what's actually going on in front of him rather than what he assumes or wants to see.

And God's response is telling. God doesn't just grant the request — God seems almost relieved by it. *Because you have not asked for yourself long life or riches… but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word.*

I want to suggest that Solomon is the first blackberry-picker in scripture who chooses *not* to pick blackberries. He's offered the whole bush — power, wealth, glory, security — and instead he asks to be the kind of person who can see it clearly. He asks, in effect, to take off his shoes.

III. Every Common Bush Afire

Which brings me to a poem I've been sitting with for weeks, ever since a conversation with a member of this congregation about this very question — why do we notice what we notice, and why do we miss what we miss.

The poem is from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's long verse-novel *Aurora Leigh*, written in 1856. In it, she writes:

> **Earth is crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God; But only he who sees takes off his shoes, The rest sit around it, and pluck blackberries.**

Read that again slowly, because it's doing something remarkable. Barrett Browning isn't saying that God is rare, or that the sacred only shows up in dramatic, unmistakable ways — a burning bush, a voice from heaven, a miracle you couldn't possibly miss. She's saying the opposite. She's saying the *whole world* is already on fire with God's presence. Every common bush. Not just Moses' bush at Horeb — *every* bush. **The sacred is not scarce. It is saturating.**

What's scarce is our attention.

And notice what she says the rest of us do instead. We don't reject God. We don't even necessarily disbelieve. We just… sit down. Right there, at the base of the burning bush, and we pick blackberries — because the blackberries are right there, and they're sweet, and they're *productive*, in a way that noticing a bush on fire is not. Blackberries you can put in a basket. You can point to them later and say: *that's what I did today.*

This is Solomon's temptation in reverse. He was offered the blackberries — wealth, long life, conquest — and he asked instead to see the bush. Most of us, most days, do the opposite. We sit down and pick.

IV. Parables of the Kingdom: Small, Hidden, Everywhere

Which brings us, finally, to Jesus — who seems to have understood this about human beings so well that he built an entire teaching style around it.

Notice what Jesus does *not* say the kingdom of heaven is like. He doesn't say it's like a coronation. A conquering army. A mountain, a temple, a throne — anything sized to match our idea of what matters. **Instead, in one breath, he stacks up image after image of things almost too small to matter at all.**

A mustard seed — "the smallest of all seeds," he says, which isn't botanically true, but is emotionally exactly true. It's the seed you'd lose in the folds of your hand. And yet it becomes a shrub big enough for birds to nest in.

A pinch of yeast — folded into three measures of flour, disappearing entirely, invisible the moment it's mixed in, and yet leavening the whole batch.

Treasure hidden in a field — not displayed, not obvious, not something you'd find unless you were digging where nobody else thought to look.

A single pearl — one object, prized above an entire inventory of goods, worth selling everything else to have.

Do you see what all five of these have in common? None of them announce themselves. The mustard seed doesn't look like a tree. The yeast doesn't look like bread. The treasure is *literally buried.* The kingdom of heaven, according to Jesus, is not the highlight reel. It is not the thing you'd naturally point to and say "there it is." It is small, it is hidden, it is easy to walk straight past — and it is, he insists, already here. Not someday. Not in the sweet by-and-by. The kingdom of heaven *is like* — present tense — these small, unglamorous, overlooked things.

Solomon asked for a listening heart so he could discern what was right in front of him. Barrett Browning says the whole earth is on fire with God and most of us are too busy picking fruit to notice. And Jesus says: the kingdom you're waiting for isn't coming with trumpets. It's the size of a mustard seed. It's already folded into the dough of your ordinary week. **The only question is whether you have the kind of attention that can find it.**

V. Learning to See: Into Great Silence

A few years ago I watched a documentary called *Into Great Silence*, filmed inside a Carthusian monastery in the French Alps. There's almost no dialogue in the entire film. The monks live in near-total silence, most of their day spent alone in their cells, coming together only rarely for prayer and a shared meal once a week.

What struck me wasn't the silence itself — it was what the camera chose to linger on. Not visions. Not ecstatic prayer. The film spends long, patient minutes on a monk washing a bowl. Water dripping from a just-cleaned dish. Light moving slowly across a stone floor over the course of an afternoon. A hand cutting vegetables.

These men have organized their entire lives around the possibility that Barrett Browning is right — that the bush really is burning, all the time, everywhere — and that the only sane response to that is to slow down enough to actually see it. Their whole vocation is Solomon's listening heart, practiced daily, for decades, on purpose.

I'll be honest with you: this fall, I'm going on a monastic retreat myself. I don't know yet what I'll find in that silence, or whether I'll be any good at it. But I know I'm going because I recognize myself in the blackberry-pickers more often than I'd like to admit. I recognize myself listing the highlights instead of noticing the mustard seeds. And some part of me suspects that if I don't deliberately go looking for the small, hidden, unglamorous places where God already is, I'll keep walking right past them, week after week, for the rest of my life.

VI. The Invitation

Here's what I don't want to leave you with this morning: a vague sense that you should be more mindful, or more spiritual, or more like a Carthusian monk in the Alps. None of us are about to take a vow of silence this afternoon. That's not the invitation.

The invitation is much smaller than that — which, given everything we've just read, is exactly the point.

This week, I want to invite you to notice one small thing a day. Not a highlight. Not an accomplishment. One ordinary, unremarkable moment — water running, a face across the table, the particular quality of light at the end of the day — and just let yourself stay there for ten seconds longer than you normally would. Take off your shoes, so to speak, instead of reaching for the blackberries.

And maybe, at the end of the week, ask yourself the question I asked you at the start — *what was the highlight of my week* — and see if the answer is any different. See if a mustard seed shows up on the list.

Solomon asked God for a heart that could listen. That's still available to us. Not as a one-time gift handed down in a dream, but as a daily practice — a way of paying attention that we get to choose, this week, and the next, and the one after that.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. It is like yeast hidden in flour. It is like treasure in a field you've walked across a hundred times without knowing it was there.

It is not far off. It is not later. It is here, now, small and hidden and easy to miss —

and you are invited to see it.

Amen.

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