

The Good News Is ... So Good, It Catches Us by Surprise

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, February 22, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [John 2:1-11](#) and [Matthew 13:31-32](#)

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My hope for this worship series is that, by the time we get to Easter, we will have spent some time reflecting on and wrestling with most of the core messages and foci of Jesus. Because each of us is a little different, we're doing this reflecting and wrestling in several ways. We will use poetry. (you've already heard a poem inspired by today's first reading). Our hymns will invite us into these core messages. The sermons will, too (I hope). And we will allow art to engage us each week.

Today, we look at the good news of – well, as soon as I use a label, I've started interpreting. Traditionally, the English translation is "the kingdom of God," or, as Matthew renders it, "the Kingdom of heaven." It's not surprising that the English uses the word kingdom. After all, it was *King* James who authorized the translation. Had they been calling themselves the British Empire at the time, the translator might have used the term "the empire of God." Had the translators been citizens of Massachusetts or Virginia, they might have translated it "the commonwealth of God."

I think our first reading is John's introduction to the good news of the commonwealth of God. It's a story about a normal wedding party and a decidedly odd miracle. With this story, John introduces us to Mary, and he doesn't mention her name. She is simply "the mother of Jesus." I find to be peculiar, too.

And the relationship between mother and son is strange. "Jesus, they've run out of wine." "So what?" She doesn't answer Jesus. She turns to the caterers and says, "Do what he tells you to do." I imagine her walking away and Jesus muttering under his breath sarcastically, "Gee, thanks mom."

And the miracle itself is strange, especially since it's Jesus first miracle in John's telling of the story of Jesus. Water turned into wine, and a preposterously huge quantity of it – 120 to 180 gallons. And it's odd that only Mary, Jesus, and the servant caterers know about the miracle. What is John getting at? I guess the disciples find out about what happened because this odd miracle changes them from people who think Jesus might be something good to people believing that he is something good.

For John, there is some revelation happening here. We, like the disciples, are supposed to gain some insight into what Jesus was all about. Apparently, it has something to do with a new order, a joy-filled order in which there is more than enough to meet all needs. The gospel writer doesn't say outright that this is about the kin-dom of God, but it sure has elements of some of the kin-dom of God parables Jesus tells in other gospels. And if you follow Jesus, you're going to be caught by the surprise of the goodness of it all.

I think our second reading, the "parable of the mustard seed," is also a little strange. It sounds a little like a joke a stand-up comic would tell. What is the commonwealth of God like? Here. I've got one for you. Take a mustard seed. It's the smallest seed (I know it's not,

but as Johnny Carson said, if you buy the premise, you buy the bit). The mustard seed is the smallest seed, and when you plant it, it grows into a mighty ... shrub. And its branches are so big, they um, ah, cast a shadow?

There is a species of shrub/tree called *Salvadora persica* that is indigenous from North Africa to India. Its common names include toothbrush tree and mustard tree.¹ Jesus could have been talking about this, rather than the mustard weeds we see around here with their pretty yellow flowers.

But if Jesus were trying to impress us, he would have quoted Ezekiel, rather than parodying him:

Thus says the Lord God:

I myself will take a sprig
 from the lofty top of the cedar;
 I will set it out.
I will break off a tender shoot
 from the topmost of its young twigs;
I myself will transplant it
 on a high and lofty mountain.
On the mountain height of Israel
 I will transplant it,
and it will produce boughs and bear fruit
 and become a noble cedar.
Under it every kind of bird will live;
 in the shade of its branches will nest
 winged creatures of every kind.

(Ezekiel 17:22-23)

If Jesus wanted to talk about a small seed turning into a great tree, he should have picked the mighty cedars of Lebanon. Their seeds are about half an inch in diameter, and they grow to 130 feet tall.² There's something else going on here.

Maybe the joke of this parable works better in first century Roman occupied Israel than it does in twenty-first century America. When Jesus told it, there may have been people scratching their heads. Maybe there were some people feeling offended, believing God's Empire must be mightier than Rome's Empire, and would say, "Don't tell me God's Empire is a mustard shrub."

But those who had ears to hear, I bet they were laughing. As Frederick Buechner asks, "Is it possible, I wonder, to say that it is only when you hear the gospel as a wild and marvelous joke that you really hear it at all? Heard as anything else, the gospel is the

¹ "Salvadora persica," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salvadora_persica (accessed 21 February 2026).

² "Cedrus libani," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cedrus_libani (accessed 21 February 2026).

church's thing, the pastor's thing, the lecturer's thing. Heard as a joke – high and unbidden and ringing with laughter – it can only be God's thing.”³

And the joke is everywhere. “God's redemptive work in the world is a wonderful joke on all of us. It's like kudzu,” Nadia Bolz-Weber writes. “God's word has to be that way because the good news of this kingdom started with the destabilizing humor of a God who comes in the form of a servant. It began with the nobility and majesty of a homeless unwed mother, the joke of the royal greatness of a peasant from an insignificant town. It continued with the honor of God dining with whores and traitors.”⁴

When news broke on Tuesday that the Rev. Jesse Jackson had died, I noticed a simple three-word prayer rising up in me: “Rest in power.” Not “rest in peace.” “Rest in power.” I realized that Rev. Jackson was like a mustard seed. He had taken root in so many places and changed the geography of our nation. The Rev. Otis Moss III wrote this tribute:

“Before there were “progressives” fighting against income inequality there was Rev. Jackson;
before there were Anti-Apartheid activists there was Rev. Jackson;
before there were warriors against the 1% elite there was Rev. Jackson;
before there were activists fighting for Palestinian dignity there was Rev. Jackson;
before there was a DEI movement to include women, Latino, Asian and Black people as part of Fortune 500 boards there was Rev. Jackson;
before there was a fight for affordable healthcare for ALL there was Rev. Jackson;
before there were environmental activists there was Rev Jesse Jackson;
before there was the modern solidarity movement there was Rev. Jackson fighting to unite Black and Latino;
when America could not get hostages released they had to call Rev. Jesse Jackson;
Before Barack Obama there was Rev. Jesse Jackson.
This generation does not know how consequential your work has been to human dignity. You are an ancestor and a beloved prophet.”⁵

The good news of Jesus Christ is like all of that. It's unexpected, like water turned to wine in great abundance. It's so good, you want to join the joy and the dancing. It's root itself so perniciously that it takes us by surprise. And we and the world are never the same.

Amen.

³ Quoted by Nadia Bolz-Weber, “Ordinary #11B,” *Christian Century*, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-05/sunday-june-17-2012> (posted 5 June 2012; accessed 8 June 2021).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Otis Moss III, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/otis.moss.iii.2025/posts/pfbid0YuQv1vWE3TDcBEu2wflsz5n4dZkuAjpUAhggrujKLJH75Zf7vBM9umYEGMDFfqWzl> (posted and accessed 17 February 2026).