

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. A looming disaster threatens the planet. Scientists sound alarms with little public response. Politicians are more invested in polishing their image than taking action to save lives. Media conglomerates are focused not on what people need to hear to be safe but what stories will drive engagement, thus boosting their ad revenue. Cable news personalities do their part to keep the news light, no matter how serious it is. Big tech entrepreneurs are influencing public policy to secure even more resources for themselves. And the general public is too distracted by the latest social media challenge or celebrity breakup to notice the real danger coming their way.
1. **Is what I just described a depiction of fiction or reality?** The answer, of course, is both. On one hand, everything I just described to you is from a work of fiction - these are all plot points in the film that recently came out through Netflix, which a few of us gathered to discuss last week. "Don't Look Up" is a dark comedic satire telling the story of a climate related disaster, in this case - a planet-killing comet discovered that's hurtling straight towards earth. **But though the plot points and characters themselves are fictional, they ring with an eerie kind of truth because to at least some degree, many would argue that each of these things I've just described in some way is happening.** The details may be different, the problems in the film may be exaggerated, but the resonance is real, so much so that the audience is often caught watching the film not quite sure whether they should laugh or cry. It might be a comedy, but the dark realities this film depicts are at times so disturbingly true, it's hard to laugh at them.
- B. Well, I start by highlighting this work of satire because it seems to me like an **excellent contemporary example of a particular mode of storytelling: telling a story that provokes.** Film critics and audiences will continue to debate whether "Don't Look Up" was a good movie - the reviews on it are decidedly mixed - but what is clear is that **the film is provocative.** It solicits a response, and not purely for entertainment value. Through the response, through the discomfort, through the debate, lessons are intended to be communicated. **The hope by the storyteller is that in watching the film, something will be revealed;** the audience will discover something about the world around them and about themselves that they hadn't discovered before.
- C. This style of storytelling isn't new. We see them in different literary sources throughout the ages from the works of Shakespeare to the Hebrew Bible.
- D. Stories that provoke were a part of the ancient world that Jesus inhabited, and this brings us to our conversation for today, and for the weeks to come. **Whatever one believes about Jesus, what seems not to be disputed is that he was master teacher of spiritual truth,** and one of the primary ways he taught was through provocative stories. He told stories to surprise, to disturb, to reveal; as one Biblical scholar says it, they were "stories with intent". **And these are the kind of stories I'm going to invite us to consider, and hopefully be provoked by, over the next couple of months in a new teaching series I'm calling "A Story-Shaped Faith".**
- E. Over the next several weeks, extending through the roughly six-week season of Lent leading up to Easter, we're going to take a look at several of the provocative stories of Jesus, stories called "parables". We'll consider together how these stories were intended to shape the faith of people in Jesus' day, as well as how they might still shape our own.
1. Now, if you've been in a church a while, a lot of these stories will probably be familiar, but I'd like to suggest that potentially in the telling and retelling and centuries passing, many of these stories have lost much of their provoking power.

2. And it makes sense why when you think about it - even 50 years from now, audiences not familiar with the cultural moment we are in will likely miss a lot of the commentary the filmmaker behind "Don't Look Up" was trying to convey, because unless they've studied their history, they may not get many of the references. How much more is this likely the case for us with a set of stories told over two thousand years ago by a Jewish peasant living on the other side of the globe? While there's no way we can close all of the cultural distance between ourselves and Jesus' original audience, over the coming weeks we'll do our best to examine these stories afresh, learn what we can about the world they were spoken in, and see if we too might be shaped by these stories with intent in helpful ways.

II. So **what exactly are the parables?** What does that term even mean?

- A. **The word parable comes from two Greek words - *para*, meaning "along side" or "together with" as in the word parallel, and *balo*, meaning "to throw".** A parable is a story that *throws alongside*. It trusts upon us something parallel to our life in order to illuminate something in it.
- B. As I've already alluded to, **parables were a significant part of the culture Jesus inhabited.** They appear in the Hebrew Bible, and also appear in the writings by Jewish rabbis before and after Jesus. Jesus was not alone in his usage of parables, but he certainly used them in powerful ways that made a significant impact on his audience. Three of the four gospel writers - Matthew, Mark and Luke - recorded a number of them in their account of Jesus' life and teaching. And through those records, these parable stories have continued to impact audiences through the millennia since.
- C. Today, as we start this series, we're gonna take a brief look at one of these parables, as recorded by Mark. This story seems like a good place to start a conversation on the parables, **as it seems to be used by each gospel writer to frame Jesus using parables for his audience.** It's featured first among the parables in all three gospels it appears in, and it seems to be a parable about parables. It also is one of the only parables that includes some interpretation from Jesus for us to consider. So let's take a look at a familiar story as it's related in the fourth chapter of the book of Mark. And before I read it to you, I want to encourage you as we read to try to pay attention to the reading with a fresh perspective and consider what surprises you, what bothers you, what confuses you about this passage. Afterwards I'll give you a few moments to think about that and potentially write down any questions or concerns that come up.
- D. ***Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. 2 He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: 3 "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. 4 As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. 6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times."***

9 Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

10 When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. 11 He told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables 12 so that, ““they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!””

13 Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? 14 The farmer sows the word. 15 Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. 16 Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. 17 But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. 18 Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; 19 but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. 20 Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.”

21 He said to them, “Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don’t you put it on its stand? 22 For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. 23 If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.”

24 “Consider carefully what you hear,” he continued. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. 25 Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.”

1. So before we go on, let’s take a moment for folks to make note of their impressions. We’ll use those a bit during our breakout time, so I encourage you to note them somewhere if you’re able. *(Take a couple of minutes.)*
 2. So as we take a look at this story and try to think about what it might tell us about parables in general, I’m not going to try to address everything in this text. We don’t have time for that. But there are a few questions that jump out to me. I’ll share each of them as well as some things I’ve learned digging into each of them, and then we’ll see what meaning we might make pulling it all together.
- III. So let’s start with the first: **What does Jesus mean when he tells his disciples that “the secret” of God’s kingdom has been given to them? Why does Jesus have secrets?**
- A. This seems to be a weird thing that Jesus is saying - like “y’all are my lucky in crowd and you get the privileged information that nobody else gets. And shhh...don’t tell anyone, it’s a secret.” But this seems totally counter to who Jesus was through everything else we see of him. He seems all about expanding access to the Divine, not tightly controlling it, so what gives?
 - B. The problem I think here is a textual one. **The word that many of our translations have recorded as “secret” is actually *mysterion*.** It could just as correctly be translated, “mystery”. What difference does that make? Both “secret” and “mystery” point to something similar - the idea of information being hidden, not fully disclosed. But they seem to have

different intentions behind them. A secret is often kept out of fear, dishonesty or perhaps self-interest. A child asks her friend on the playground to keep her crush a secret, fearful of what others might think. A thief takes something in secret. An investor may not want others to know where he's putting his money, less his investment be diluted. But a mystery, at least a spiritual mystery, is different. That kind of mystery recognizes that on some level, information is hidden because it cannot be fully known or understood. Sacred mystery, or what theologians Stephen Boyer and Chris Hall call "revelational mystery" is not a puzzle to be solved like an Agatha Christie book or a secret to be divulged by reading someone's diary...it's more like an understanding to be pondered. They describe it this way:

1. *A revelational mystery excites wonder, awe, amazement, astonishment. . . . This is the way a revelational mystery works: we know, and yet the mystery remains.*

C. Jesus wasn't confiding in the Twelve or those gathered with him some protected information that was for their ears only. He was naming that they were the ones who had received in some way sacred mystery, whatever that might mean. And that brings me to my next question.

IV. So what about the quote that comes right after the mystery line? The next thing he says is that to those on the outside everything is in parables, and then he shares a quote saying "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!" **Is Jesus really saying he doesn't want people to receive forgiveness?**

A. Here too, we can't really appreciate what is being said if we don't appreciate the context Jesus is pointing to. **This quote comes from Isaiah, chapter 6.** It's spoken by God when the Divine calls Isaiah as a prophet and encourages him to speak to God's people the warnings God is sending him to preach; warnings intended to provoke change in the hearts and behaviors of God's people. The people were living unjustly, oppressing their neighbors, living in ways that grieved the heart of God and Isaiah was called to speak this truth to people who didn't want to hear it, and also name that if they couldn't change their ways, things would not go well for them. There would be consequences to their unwillingness to heed the words of the prophet.

1. Even as God calls Isaiah, God names to him that God anticipates that the people will be obstinate. Their hearts were becoming hardened God was naming, and then with what many scholars understand to be clear sarcasm God says, "otherwise they might turn and be healed" or in some translations "forgiven". This is the frustration of a parent with a stubborn teenager. "Oh, yes I'm such a cruel parent, making you study. God forbid you do your homework and actually get into a good college! We wouldn't want that would we?" Of course the Divine desires the turning and healing, that is why God is sending the prophet, just as the Divine understands that people will make their own decisions, including at times, reckless ones.

2. In ancient Israel this text, Isaiah 6 became an important moment in Israel's story. This text became emblematic for the truth that the prophet's call is often a lonely one. The prophet is often called to speak uncomfortable truths that will not be embraced by all who hear them. By Jesus' day Isaiah 6 was the text other prophets like Jeremiah or rabbis often pointed to when they wanted to name the stubbornness of people who aren't interested in the prophet's message. By quoting Isaiah, Jesus was framing for his listeners the work he was doing. He's saying that he is coming in the way of a prophet and like many of the prophets before him, his teachings aren't going to be received by everyone who hears them.

- V. There's one more question I want to probe a bit before trying to make some meaning of this passage. **How are we to understand Jesus' interpretation of the parable? What is it meant to tell? What is left for the audience to discover?**
- A. Often when I've heard this story preached or explored in a Bible story, Jesus' interpretation is pointed to as the clear key for explaining in an obvious way the meaning of the parable. Jesus talks about the seed being planted as "the word" and different people respond to that word in different ways. Typically there's an invitation to define the good productive soil as the life of the good, Bible believing Christian who responds positively to the gospel, recognizes Jesus died for their sins, puts their faith in Jesus Christ, and thus allows him to bear spiritual fruit in their lives. There's also an invitation to look on others whose lives aren't so spiritually bountiful as those other kinds of not-so-good soils. But is that really what Jesus is saying? Is his interpretation that clear?
1. First off, interestingly Jesus never defines who he thinks the sower is. He doesn't say if the sower is God, or himself, or the disciples who are listening to him. All he makes clear is the sower is someone trying to communicate something, "the farmer sows the word."
 2. Jesus also doesn't make clear what he means by the "word". Christians have often filled in the blanks on that - he means a certain version of the gospel, he means Jesus himself, he means the Bible. But none of these really make sense in this context. Even the actual word "word" is misleading. **The Greek word Jesus is using is *logos***; "the farmer sows the *logos*". ***Logos* refers to content, not form.** In Greek there was a word for a set of letters on a page - *lexis*. There was also a word for a book like the Bible - *biblion*. *Logos* is the word for the heart of an argument or message, the logic of it. Jesus is describing someone sharing their message, but who it is or exactly what that *logos* is, is not explained.
 3. I think there's a reason Jesus isn't more explicit. His explanation is intended to help people make connections, but only so they can do the work themselves of pondering what it means further. And this is exactly how ancient parables were intended to work; to open up conversations, not shut them down. Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, who I'll be pointing to more in this series because her work on the parables is so helpful, makes this point about them: "*When we seek universal morals from a genre that is designed to surprise, challenge, shake up, or indict and look for a single meaning in a form that opens to multiple interpretations, we are necessarily limiting the parables and, so, ourselves.*" I don't think Jesus was intending in his interpretation to limit the parables, and we shouldn't want to limit them in our discussions of them either.
- VI. And yet we are called to make meaning, and so after answering those few questions, I'm going to try to name a few things that I think are helpful takeaways from this passage as we look to ponder why Jesus uses this particular teaching form, and how these stories might be helpful in shaping our faith.
- A. **Prophetic teaching will inevitably be rejected by many who hear it. The prophet might find this discouraging, but they must speak their message regardless, because some folks will be ready to hear it and be impacted for the better.**
1. It's interesting where this story appears in the narrative Mark is telling. The way he tells the story, this incident of Jesus teaching this parable comes early in his ministry and right after he's just received a visit from his family. They come to try to fetch him as he's in the midst of preaching and healing, but he won't go to them. Instead he points to those followers around him who are attentive to what he's doing. "These are my mothers and my brothers," he says. Clearly Jesus is naming that not everyone can appreciate the message he has to give; even his own family doesn't seem to get it. But the fact that his

family doesn't understand him isn't a reason to stop speaking what he is there to speak; nor is it a reason to cut them off. He can love folks, whether they can receive his message or not, and also stay faithful to the work of continuing to speak it.

2. On one level, it strikes me that this was a helpful way to frame what Jesus' listeners were seeing in their midst as some folks drew close to Jesus and others grew frustrated with him. But it also strikes me as helpful information for his followers, who themselves would eventually be sent out to speak prophetic truths to folks, some of whom would be receptive, and some of whom wouldn't be. In the same way, we too may consider how this understanding might impact us with the prophetic truths we feel called to speak.
3. No doubt, Adam McKay, the filmmaker for *Don't Look Up*, knew not everyone was going to love his film. If he wanted to make a film that wouldn't provoke and even perhaps offend anyone, it wouldn't have been this film. But knowing that it wouldn't be for everyone, he told the story the way he told it with the hopes that some might receive his message that wouldn't have otherwise. And that brings me to my next takeaway.

B. Parables aren't meant to obscure truth, but to reveal it. As we wrestle with the mystery, more is revealed in it.

1. In any given crowd, there are gonna be some people who respond to a message without a lot of work - they respond because they already care about the issue, because they respect the messenger, because they really believe in the science. And then there are those for whom just stating things clearly isn't that effective. Perhaps they already think they know what they believe on a topic, they have their trusted sources and it's not this raggedy rabbi or the *New York Times*. Haven't we seen this again and again in the last couple of years when it comes to covid, to vaccines, to masks? Psychologists tell us: all of us have confirmation bias - we're most likely to accept things that confirm the beliefs we already hold. **In those instances, new information has to come in an indirect way if it's going to be integrated, and stories that provoke are one of the most powerful ways that can happen.**
2. **Jesus isn't telling parables to hide truth from people, he's inviting them into mysteries so they can discover new truth for themselves.** This is the sign of a wise teacher, who knows that any discovery we make on our own is more likely to be one we hold onto rather than just more information someone has told us. The parables are intended to catch the skeptics by surprise and call even the closest followers of Jesus do some work, to wrestle with mystery, and to learn something new about themselves and perhaps the ways of the Divine that they hadn't understood before. This is why I think we have that second brief parable about the lamp. **Jesus doesn't want his message ultimately to be hidden away; what a loss that would be!** Rather the concealment is meant to bring a deeper kind of revelation. For those who will do the work of pondering the meaning, they will receive more clarity. Those who are too distracted or apathetic to try won't get the benefit. And that brings me to my final takeaway for us.

C. There's a difference between hearing with our ears and hearing with our hearts. Unless we allow the message we receive to provoke us in our minds and spirits, and impact our behavior, we haven't really received it.

1. Did you notice how often there are references in this passage to **hearing or listening**? The first word Jesus says here is "Listen!" He ends his explanation on the parable by saying "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Again and again Jesus is emphasizing listening, but it's clear he doesn't just mean what happens with our ears. Throughout the passage, through the reference to Isaiah, through the parable and his explanation of it,

Jesus is naming the difference between learning something and absorbing it. It's not enough to just receive communication. If we want the *logos* to make a meaningful impact on our lives, to bear measurable fruit, it needs to sink deeper in our soil, a soil clear of rocks and thorns. We have to be willing to be provoked.

2. I wonder if what he meant when Jesus told the smaller group the mystery had been given to them, was that **he saw that they were starting to do the work**. They cared; that's why they came to Jesus with their questions. They wanted more understanding, the parables were starting to provoke them. Jesus would keep telling them with the hope of calling more into that mysterious work of pondering, of debating, of being disturbed. He would keep telling parables with the hopes that more of those who heard him would begin to enter the mystery in a meaningful way too.
3. This I hope is a call to us over the next couple of months. I wonder how Jesus might feel about the reality that his stories which were meant to provoke have been so domesticated by his followers through the millennia, usually at times **tamed not to pull them into mystery but to be reduced to simple morals that confirm their own biases**. "Don't worry Christian, you're in church; that means you're good soil." What if instead Jesus followers asked one another "what message are you open to hearing today? What message might you reject or not be willing to think too deeply about if you heard it? What might it mean if a different perspective was disturbing to you; would you let it sink in deep or just fall away?"
4. Friends, whatever our experiences have been of the parables in the past, I hope over the next several weeks as we look at these stories of Jesus, we might encourage ourselves and one another not to settle for easy answers or simple tried-and-true interpretations. **May we let these stories work in us something new**. May we let them call us deeper into divine mystery. May we even see meaningful change in the way we live as they work on us. And as all of that happens, may we and the Spirit that sows into us rejoice in the bountiful harvest of new life that blossoms in our midst. Amen.