

Can You Imagine?!

Luke 2:1-20; John 12:24

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[Begin by reading Luke 2:1-20]

A few years ago we were shocked by the first news accounts of a terrible Tsunami causing unimaginable destruction and killing thousands of people. Why, we wondered? Where is God when things like this happen? Of course, as 2005 followed its course there was even more destruction: hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods. And so, as we once more gather to consider the coming of the Christ Child we must once again consider the question: Why God? Where have you been? What are you doing?

Think about this little seed I am holding on the tip of my finger. It represents a theme we find over and over in Scripture, not so much in words as in the events. Jesus comes closest to putting it into words as He says in John 12:24, *"I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."* Jesus is talking about death and today we have gathered to talk about a birth so why this verse and this little seed? Because both the seed and the verse refer to re-creation—a new relationship with God

God is in the business of recreating a world that has taken a turn for the worst and as we contemplate the birth of a little baby—the Christ Child—we must learn to think of that birth in terms of His re-creation. The baby was like this seed: a tiny, shriveled thing, crying as all babies do, vulnerable, incapable of doing anything for himself but the future of the world rested upon Him. For most people in Bethlehem it was just an ordinary event among ordinary people on an ordinary day. But as we look back from the vantage point of His later ministry, crucifixion and resurrection we can see that little baby as the seed of new life.

Now this seed on my finger is not a grain of wheat. It's another rather common seed that usually gets sent through the garbage disposal or thrown into the trash in our kitchens. You are so familiar with it that you don't even pay any attention to it and I would bet that very few in this room could even tell me what kind of a seed it is. It's just an ordinary seed and, normally, we have no particular reason to consider it at all. Likewise, if you lived in Bethlehem on the day Jesus was born the baby would have seemed the same way, very ordinary, unremarkable, except ...well... its not everyday a baby is born in that little stable down the street. There would be no real reason to even think more about that birth, after all, the travelers will soon move on and you have no reason to think you'll ever hear about the baby again.

Now, think about this seed on my finger. Can you imagine what this seed will look like when it sprouts? What will it produce? What difference will it make in the world? That's a hard question since you don't even know what kind of seed it

is. You're probably thinking, "how can I possibly know what this seed will produce?" You can't even imagine it, can you?

Neither could the people in Bethlehem imagine what kind of fruit the baby in the manger would produce. How could they possibly think this baby was God himself, Emmanuel? I doubt that even Mary understood what had really taken place for over and over as she witnessed things in the life of Jesus it says she *pondered* these things in her heart. That is to say that she wondered about them. What did they mean? How did they relate to what the angel told her? How did they relate to the events in the stable when the child was born? And, I wonder, even though the angels appeared to the shepherds that night, did they really understand? I think the answer to all of these is that no one, not Mary and Joseph, not the shepherds, no one, could begin to imagine what this tiny thing would produce.

None would or could understand that the seed that was the Christ Child would have to fall to the ground and die before it really produced the re-creation God had in mind. They only saw a tiny hand, cute little feet, a vulnerable baby born with some unusual fanfare and in an unusual place. But still, just a baby, an everyday event.

I doubt that many of you have guessed what kind of seed I have on my finger. Let me show you what it can produce. ^[hold up an apple] It's an apple seed! But, while I can look at the apple and imagine how it would taste I still can't imagine the size of the tree or the kind of root stock that was used to produce it. How many apples will the seeds in this apple produce. I just can't imagine. I have learned that all commercial apple trees consist of two parts that are grafted together to form the tree. "The *scion* is the top portion that branches and bears fruit and is grafted onto a *rootstock*. The type of fruit is determined by the scion variety. The rootstock can be a "seedling", which produces a full size or standard tree, or the rootstock can be "size-controlled" or "dwarfing", which produces a tree that is smaller than full size. The rootstock determines the relative size of the tree but does not affect the type or quality of fruit that the tree bears. Different rootstocks are desirable because they can control the size of the apple tree, reduce the time until the tree reaches fruit-bearing age, and may offer some pest resistance." ^[Parker]

So, it would seem that the seed is just the first stage in this re-creation of the apple tree. So it was with the baby in the manger. Who could know that He would have to suffer as He did, die on a cross and be resurrected before He could produce mature fruit. And what would that fruit be like? Who could imagine it?

In our day we portray Him each year as a baby in a manger—a baby in a box, but we never celebrate our own birthday by reconstructing our birth place. We celebrate our birthdays as we are today. The result of this re-creation of His birth, I'm afraid, is that often this baby never gets out of the box.

It leads to another problem too. If we do take Him out of the box we never the process that took Him from a seed to bearing fruit. We never think of Him as He will ultimately be. If we only look at His life among us we still have trouble imagining what we will become through Him. We are in danger of missing out on that great sense of joyful anticipation as we look forward to His return.

So, when I think about the baby born to Mary and placed in the box in that crude stable I must take Him out of the box and think of what He became, the impact He had upon the world, upon my life and millions of others. But, I should never stop there. I must remember that He overcame death and ascended to heaven and that He has promised to return on some unexpected day to take you and me to be where He is. In that place we will not be planted to recreate what we have produced here on earth. But, like the apple, will be grafted into His rootstock and I can't even imagine what that will be like. I just know that it will be wonderful beyond my wildest imagination.

So, as I think of the seed as being like the Christ and God's re-creation process I simply can't imagine the end result. But it helps if I begin to think of the Christ Child as the seed that had to die and be planted in the ground so it could reproduce a great variety of perfect fruit. What I can see and feel of Christ today is nothing when compared to the fruit God will one day harvest from those grafted into the rootstock of Christ. It is a growth process that began with the baby in the manger and will not stop until Christ returns a second time and takes us home. Can you imagine what that will be like?

So, where was God in that Tsunami, the earthquakes, hurricanes, and floods? Where will He be as such things continue to happen in the future? He's here with us and with those affected by those events. He's always present for what we are seeing and hearing around the world are the sounds of seeds being planted so that a new world, a new life might spring forth. It will be a life beyond our wildest dreams, beyond imagination for we cannot see what we shall be in Christ.

Bibliography:

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