The Messiah Miracle

The 8th Sunday after Pentecost, July 10, 2005

Isaiah 55:1-5,10-13 Psalm 65 Romans 8:9-17 Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field
shall clap their hands.
(Isaiah 55:12)

Yesterday, Iza and I took a walk around Messiah, admiring the day lilies and hollyhocks in the parking-lot, then walking by the day-care center's playground. Tucked in the corner were several tomato and pea plants, bent but not broken by this week's heavy rain.

Sometime this spring, the children and their teachers would have planted little peas and tomato seeds in Dixie cups, watering them every day until green shoots sprang forth. Tiny miracles in paper cups, reaching up for the sun.

In May, they must have dug holes in the corner of the playground, tenderly putting these young plants into welcoming dirt. And now, fearless of the rain and sun and errant tricycles, these plants are striving to bring forth a harvest.

I remember the seedlings of my childhood: Growing lima beans on damp paper towels in kindergarten. I didn't like lima beans, but I loved watching the little leaves and roots erupt! Trying to grow an avocado plant by suspending an avocado pit with toothpicks over a glass of water.

And in our first house in Chicago, I saved the life of a weed. It was maybe four inches high, and I decided it was beautiful and refused to let my mom pull it out of the garden. That weed grew into a giant Tree of Heaven, which I used to visit even after we moved away. An exuberant, surprising harvest.

Which is exactly what Matthew's Gospel is about: The abundant harvest gathered from God's Word. What God is bringing forth in the world is not merely adequate. It is shockingly, excessively abundant, generous beyond our imagining.

The peasants and farmers listening to Jesus tell the parable of the scattered seed, would have been perfectly familiar with his images. In Palestine, where the ground is full of rocks, farmers wouldn't dare try to plow the ground for planting seeds. Instead, they broadcast seed in wide throws, and in a good year a farmer might gather 5 to 10 times what he sowed.

But 30, 60… 100-fold? The size of that harvest would have shocked them.

The peasants and farmers listening to Jesus wouldn't have been surprised at the fate of the seeds that fell on the path or on rocks or among the thorns. That's not the focus of Jesus' parable.

The explanation that Mathew has Jesus give, is likely a later interpretation, inserted into the text on which Matthew based his gospel. It is an explanation that probably gave much-needed comfort and assurance to the women and men of a small, persecuted, struggling church.

But it's an explanation that can divert our attention away from the confident, shocking conclusion of Jesus' parable:

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That God's Word brings forth an abundant harvest, 30, 60, 100-fold!

For 134 years, God has been bringing in a great harvest from our parish. This week I've been reading a history of Messiah, written in 1971 for our Centennial.

The history is titled *The Messiah Miracle*. A miracle is more than survival of scattered seeds. It is the story of unexpected, abundant harvest, generous in the way that only God's Word is generously abundant.

Certainly Messiah has survived much, including the terrible fire in 1943 that destroyed the church buildings. Messiah has installed four different pipe organs, and 10 rectors, and the organs were often easier to install than the clergy.

The miracle of Messiah is not mere survival. The miracle is the abundant harvest, 30 and 60 and 100-fold. God has scattered the seed of God's word, and Messiah has proved itself fertile ground. This community has raised up leaders, teachers, and singers, healers, artists, and prophets.

We have brought forth an abundant harvest of young Christians. After World War I, Messiah was the center of youth leadership in the diocese, organizing one of the first chapters of the Young People's Fellowship. We provide Sunday School year-round, valuing children's "gifts of spiritual insight, curiosity and joy," and following Jesus' example, we welcome everyone of *all ages* around this Eucharistic table.

We have brought forth an abundant harvest of music; a harvest you can hear every Sunday in the choir and congregation, in the musical groups that make such beautiful use of our sanctuary. There is a hymn tune, Auburndale, named after our parish, composed by parishioner and famed 19th century composer Horatio Parker. And our minister of music, Bic, has just had one of his organ compositions published.

The harvest we are beginning to bring in through Parishes in Partnership, is part of a harvest we have been reaping for decades. Even as we begin to make plans for how this partnership can help bring forth God's justice in our local community, we draw from a long history of working in partnership with other churches

And Messiah brings forth an abundant harvest of prayer and healing. The proof of that harvest is all around us! When you walk into this space, you can feel the prayers of hundreds of women and men over more than 130 years.

There is rocky and difficult ground out there; the news is full of hurricanes and bombings and suffering. I don't believe that God has provided Messiah's abundant harvest for our own self-congratulation. I believe God has provided Messiah an abundant harvest to share with the rest of Auburndale, the rest of the world, to bring life to the dry places, to bring in sheaves of joy where only tears had been sown.

But on this day, gathered around this table we give thanks for the word, scattered across the hills, that has been gathered up into this one body, abundantly, wonderfully, the miracle of Messiah. In the words of our closing hymn,

Let every instrument be tuned for praise!
Let all rejoice who have a voice to raise!
And may God give us faith to sing always
Alleluia!

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