

The Good News Is So Good It Surprises Us – Matthew 13:31-32,
John 2:1-11

Rev. Matt Nieman

February 22, 2026

We've arrived at the season of Lent. Lent was originally a season for new converts to learn and prepare for their baptisms on Easter. During that time, they would study what was central to Christianity.

In this series that we are embarking on today for Lent, "Tell Me Something Good," we're going to study texts that are essential to what the Good News of the Gospel is all about.

If I asked you, "What is the Good News?" with regard to the Gospel story, you'd have a variety of responses—highlighted by what we mark and celebrate during Holy Week and Easter: Christ's sacrifice on a cross in an unmatched act of love and devotion, and his resurrection from the grave that marks his victory over suffering and death.

However, the Good News is also about Jesus' ministry and what was central to him throughout it, like radical welcome, care for the vulnerable, nourishment for the hungry, and nonviolence in the face of injustice. At the heart of it, we find liberation, love, mercy, and grace.

And these are all very good. In a world in which there is so much pain, despair, division, and marginalization, Jesus' teachings bring joy. And we're going to celebrate them this Lent.

Today, we focus on two stories that contain joyous surprise, because that's what the Good News can do.

In the parable of the mustard seed, the seed referred to was likely a black mustard seed, the tallest of the mustard plants in

Judea, which could grow up to six feet tall. One of the smallest seeds, it surprisingly grows into a large tree-like shrub.

The message here seems to be that something different from what you expect will flourish into God's kingdom. Small beginnings can yield unexpected results.

And then, there's the spectacular account of Jesus' first act of ministry. It's not a healing, or an exorcism, or turning tables for justice. Jesus' first act is to help ensure a party becomes the best party possible. It's a total surprise.

That party becomes the best party because Jesus' turning the water into wine provides restoration to an event of high magnitude that seemingly was going to end in disappointment and embarrassment.

He turns scarcity into abundance. He turns 180 gallons of water into the very best wine. That's a lot of good wine!

And so the beginning of Jesus' ministry marks the start of God's work in the world that has been long-awaited. It leads us to expect surprisingly good and abundant things to come as Jesus begins his ministry.

In the church today, we also long for the surprising goodness of God. But it's hard to wait for it. And in the difficulty of waiting, we try to take over for God's surprising restoration.

In reviewing a book entitled, *When Church Stops Working: A Future for Your Congregation beyond More Money, Programs, and Innovation*, by Andrew Root and Blair Bertrand, Phillip J. Reed wrote this:

[Church leaders] are beleaguered. Continuing congregational decline makes us increasingly anxious. We are the leaders who are supposed to know how to reverse the trends, but nothing seems to work. Hope is diminishing and we are weary.

In [this book], the authors tell us to wait. Decline is not our problem; rather, our big issue is that we have been infected by the secular age, leaving us with a diminished concept of God. It is not that fewer people have faith, it is that our faith, as expressed in our worship and practice, connects with fewer people. ...

Root and Bertrand tell us to wait. Busy people and busy churches [can be] killers; accelerating busyness demonstrates that when we emphasize human agency, we lose a sense of divine agency in this secular age. Without a grasp of God's action, the church becomes the star of its own story, and we become the authors of our own lives.

[We should] wait and just be. Waiting is not throwing up our hands in despair, frustration or resignation; waiting is a positive act of surrender to God. We wait for a deep connection with God, a "spirit to Spirit" connection. While we wait, we should build relationships, passionately attending to each other at this moment, seeking God together.

The "God who is God" is a wild, acting God, beyond human capture or control. No human strategies or tactics, no religious mechanisms or programs entice God to appear on demand. We only know God as God reveals God. ...

Pastors are beleaguered because we focus on our own actions to resolve the crisis of decline. Let's try waiting for a while. Our wild God may just surprise us.

Like Jesus surprised his mother and the few others at the wedding banquet who knew that the wine was running out and restored it in miraculous fashion, we should have faith that Jesus might just surprise us in joyous ways that have not yet been revealed to us.

So what do any of us do in the meantime while we wait? Well, that parable of the mustard seed can steer us to some

meaningful action. For indeed, waiting is not about doing nothing. For the man in the parable did a critical act in making that small seed come to life. He planted it.

Fred Craddock, one of the great Protestant preachers of the 20th century, gave his take on this parable.

“If this parable did not have an interpretation, and all I had was the parable itself, this is what I would say: First of all, please do not ever give up [on] anybody. Please. The plain fact is that I do not know and you do not know whether [there] will be any growth. So let us not be selective, saying “Oh, I think I will put a seed here. This looks like a good one, but I won’t put a [seed] there — no use fooling with him.” No, spread the seed ... Randomly scatter the good seed of God and do not try to predict what the result will be, because you do not know. Every congregation in the world has about a dozen people who are a surprise to their own relatives. “I never dreamed he would be in church!” “I never dreamed she would be active in that.” This is God’s business. This is Christ sowing the seed for goodness sake. And what do we know? We don’t know anything.

“Also, please, please stop thinking that success in the prospering of the Word is up to you. No farmer puts a seed in the soil and then screams at it, “Now, come on, get up!” It will come up in its own time; with sun and water, it will come up. You do not have to beg it, you do not have to blackmail it, and you do not have to threaten it. I get a little weary of people, good-hearted, good-spirited people, who on behalf of their churches, worry you to death! Just plant the seed. It is God’s seed, and the seed carries its future in its bosom. It is the seed, and it will grow. Just plant it. Be prodigal in planting; cast it anywhere and everywhere, no fences. Trust the seed, the gracious good love of God for you and

your family.” (Fred Craddock, “At Random,” based on Matthew 13:1-9 (a parallel to today’s lesson) in *The Cherry Log Sermons* (Westminster John Knox, 2001), 23.)

God has the ability and the inclination to surprise us with goodness; but it’s God who does the surprising, not us. We just do the work of planting the seed.

180 gallons of wine! That’s what those stone jars full of water produced in the wedding banquet miracle. And Jesus did this. He restored the fortunes of the wedding party who was not left to wonder what had gone wrong amid their time of celebration.

Jesus will surprise us still today. It’s difficult, but we shouldn’t take it upon ourselves to think we have the capacity to do this surprising work. We’re not God.

We just plant small seeds. And then we wait to see what becomes of them. And in maybe the least likely of scenarios, a few of them might grow into something that will surprise us.

The goodness of God is still played out in surprising and joyous ways.