

Preaching To Anyone with Ears: *Mark 4:1-23*

Plymouth Park, Good News, October 14, 2007

It's Sunday morning. The song leader just finished singing, "Open our ears Lord, and help us to listen, open our hearts Lord, we want to see Jesus." That's the preacher's cue. He stands up from the second pew with his Bible and notes in hand, straightens his tie, buttons his top coat button, and climbs up the stairs and into the pulpit.

He's got a good one for them this week. He worked extra hard on this one. This sermon wasn't pulled together late Saturday evening. It was done by Wednesday, and the words are waiting to be thrown from his lips.

He lays his Bible open, flips to the text for today, straightens his notes, and prays, "God help us to listen to your word today, amen." He reads the text, "Listen! A sower went out to sow."

The word of the Lord.

Twenty minutes later, it's all over. He got them this week for sure. How could they miss that message? It was clear; it was precise. The song leader starts singing, "Take my life and let it be." Second verse. "Take my hands." They're about to come running up the aisle for sure, he thinks, responding to my powerful message. Third verse, "Take my ears and let them hear." Be seated pleased. He's seated back on his second pew. There are no tearful confessions today. No one has responded. The word was thrown out into the congregation, and the preacher was sure they would hear it *this* time. But now it seems no one has heard.

He stumbles to the back during the last song, ready to perform his weekly priestly duty of shaking every member's hand. "Oh, that was a good sermon this week." "I've never heard the text that way before." "Powerful stuff, brother." "I sure liked that story you told, it reminded me of grandma..."

The deacon shuts off the lights; the preacher's the last one to leave. He stumbles home, sits in his chair, and pulls out his list as he does every Sunday, and with red ink, he begins adding to the list of names.

Charles Ezell: Rocky soil.

Mildred Fillmore: Thorny soil.

Mark Bryant: I think a bird got him.

Paul, Rocky soil. Esther, thorny. Sally—she might be good soil.

He puts the red pen down and mutters quietly, I'm wasting my time, preaching to deaf people. I don't know how much longer I can do this. If only they had the ears to hear.

Do you think Jesus had a list? Surely he had labeled a person now and again. Oh, Martha, she's thorny soil for sure. Letting the cares of the world keep her from sitting at my feet. Peter—rocky soil. Sure he says he'll stand by me now, but wait until the rooster crows. John, oh, John, there's no better soil than John.

If Jesus could read people's hearts, surely he could tell how they would receive his word? Yet, he always seems to be preaching, and no one gets it. Jesus is talking about this, and they hear that. Where did they get that from this? That's not Jesus. Jesus does this, and they think he did that. Jesus didn't do that; he did this! People were always perceiving Jesus, but it seemed they never saw.

Yet what does Jesus do?

If I were Jesus, I would give up. No one gets his message. The theme of the book of Mark is, No One Gets It, at least not the religious folk. The demons get it, they know he's the son of God. We think Peter gets it when he says, "You are the Messiah," yet a few verses later Jesus calls him Satan and says, "Get behind me." Time after time they don't get. How many times can you preach to a crowd that just doesn't get it? One Sunday is hard, but Sunday, after Sunday, after Sunday, after Sunday. One year, two, ten, twenty—they don't get it. You've said it a hundred times, and they don't get it. Jesus must have gotten frustrated.

Parents, you know how it is with your children. No matter how much you preach to them, they don't get it. This is not good for you. Don't do this. Yet, they do it. The very things you tell them not to do, these seem to be the things they want to do.

Wives you know how it is with your husbands. And husbands you know how it is with your wives. No matter how hard we try, we just can't change our spouse. We preach and nag and correct and teach, yet they are still the same person we married. It's like we're casting the seed on rocky soil. Nothing gets through.

We try to live right. We try to be examples to those around us. We even at times try to share the good news of Christ with those who do not know the message. We share, we teach, we live out the message, yet more times than not it seems no one hears, no one sees. Are our words in vain?

It'd be a lot easier if people just came with labels, "Hello my name is rocky soil." "Hello, I get carried away by birds." That would sure save some time, wouldn't it? If people had labels, you would know who to invest your life in. "Ah, Good soil. I'm so glad you showed up. I'm planning a retreat, just for you. I've got this Bible class, just for you. Come to my study, I want you to read this book." Good soil's a good investment. Good soil's worth working late.

“Carried away by birds”, we’re having game night this week. Maybe you’d like to come and play scattergories, while me and Good Soil go pray?

If we knew what kind of soil was in the gardens of our homes, our workplaces, our congregations, we could spend the time where it counts. We could preach and teach and serve and love the ones who would hear, whose lives would be changed, give *them* the meat, and dole out the milk for the ones who will never produce fruit.

But, alas, I’ve yet to see soil tags on people. And we may pull out our list of names week after week, trying to decipher what kind of soil is in the garden, and sometimes, our list gets it pretty close, sometimes we nail it on the head, but sometimes we’re dead wrong.

Perhaps you hear what happened to Mr. Thorny Soil? Get this. He sold his home in the suburbs, moved to a shack in the inner city, and he’s working with a mentor program for the kids in his new neighborhood. Mr. Thorny Soil, of all people. When I heard that, I had to get out my list, change his label.

And Ms. Rocky Soil. I know you all heard about her divorce. And didn’t we all see it coming. Just like Rocky soil, she was all excited about the marriage, in love, oh, what great joy, but the love quickly faded away, because their relationship had no depth.

Her divorce was nasty, too. Lots of yelling. Kids being pulled here and there. Money, debt, houses, cars, the dog Charlie, who gets to keep Charlie? It was nasty.

When it was finally over, I knew we’d never see her again at church. This trial, this persecution would surely scorch her faith for good. But you know what? Next Sunday, she was there. And the next; and the next. She started volunteering with the youth group. She went with them to Mexico for missions. She’s started a divorce recovery group. One Sunday she stood in church to give her testimony, to tell us all what we were dying to know: how Ms. Rocky Soil made it through her trial.

“I was upset. Oh, boy was I upset. Mad at my ex. At God. At the kids. At everyone. And then I remembered what Jesus said. He said that we need to pray for those who persecuted us. Love our enemies. So I tried it. I prayed that God would help me love my husband. Not in a romantic way, that was long gone. But love him like Jesus loves him. It took a while, but it happened. I love him like Jesus loves him.”

I couldn’t believe it. Ms. Rocky Soil—making it through the tough times. I had to get out my list.

But that's nothing compared to the shocker I got a few days ago. Mr. Good Soil, oh I had invested some time in him. Weekly prayer meetings, phone calls, retreats. He was one of the most promising Christians I knew. He would volunteer to serve communion, teach Bible classes, even drive the youth group on a mission trip. Oh, Mr. Good Soil.

But as it turns out, Mr. Good Soil wasn't as good as I had thought after all. He sure looked the part, that's for sure, but he was apparently two-faced. It seems he'd been stealing from his company, fixing the books, for years. He's in jail now. Mr. Good Soil?! I had to get out my list.

This sower Jesus talks about, throwing the seed all over the place. What's up with that? If he knows anything about sowing, surely he can tell the difference between good soil and bad soil. But there he is, throwing good seed on bad soil. What a waste! He's like a misplaced sprinkler, spraying more water on the house and the sidewalk, than on the grass and plants. What a waste of seed. What a lazy sower.

If you know people won't perceive, Jesus, if you know they won't hear, Jesus, why do you still throw them the seed? Tell us what *this* means, Jesus.

Jesus looks at us, kindly. "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables...Do you not understand this parable?"

We should understand, right? I mean, if we were good soil, wouldn't we understand this parable?

But we don't. Yet, Jesus explains it to us anyway, gently, in detail. Here's what this means. This is what that means. This is this. That is that. We get it now. He has opened our minds. Our ears can hear. Our eyes can see. The light shines all around us, and we understand.

It seems Jesus hasn't even given up on us. Perhaps we were not the soil we thought we were; yet he still shares the word with even us!

Jesus stands up to preach. "Listen! A sower went out to sow."

It's a good sermon, a rousing sermon. The points were great; the Old Testament allusion—masterful; the parable—brilliant. He sits down and they begin to sing. You can tell from their faces that some see it, but most don't, and some think they do, but they really don't. And you know what Jesus does? Even though they didn't really see it, He shows up next week, stands in the pulpit, and preaches to them all again. And some see it, but most don't, and some think they do, but they really don't. And you know what Jesus does? He preaches again the next week. And the next. And the next. And he's still preaching today.

You see, Jesus has no list. He doesn't see soil. If they've got ears, he'll preach to them, no matter what they may hear.

Jesus is like a sower, who throws out seeds on all kinds of soil, caring not if it's good soil or bad, giving everyone the chance to hear the word and bear fruit.

He's like a Lamp, that gives light to everyone, never hiding behind a bushel or under the bed, but is put on a lamp stand, so that all may see. Some see, but they don't see clearly. Some hear, but they don't quite understand. But he keeps shining the lamp, and the more he shines, the more people fall in line behind him.

Before long, they begin to see, to really see. They begin to hear, really hear.

What had been hidden is now disclosed. What was once a mystery, is now brought to light. And there before them is a new world, a world filled with all kinds of plants in all kinds of soil, each one bearing their fruit in their own way, and in their own time.

It's taken a while for us to hear, hasn't it? We've been listening, but not perceiving, for sometime now. If we're honest, we've rejected the word a time or two. But now...now we can hear. Now, we can see. Now, we can enter Jesus' world.

May anyone with ears to hear, hear.