“Big things have small beginnings.”

T.E. Lawrence was an obscure British archaeologist and colonel in World War I who was sent as a political liaison to Arabia in 1916. There he became a key contributor to the Great Arab Revolt against the Turkish Ottoman Empire. He eventually earned the name “Lawrence of Arabia,” which was the title of a 1962 film about him. Toward the beginning of the film, the British General Murray argues with the head of the Arab Bureau—played by Claude Rains—against sending Lawrence on his mission. Murray calls the Arab conflict “a tempest in a teapot, a sideshow—a sideshow of a sideshow.” To which Dryden famously replies, “Big things have small beginnings.” In the film and in history, in only two years, the Arabic Armies secured an armistice with the vastly larger and more powerful Ottoman Empire because of the counsel and leadership of Lawrence. Big things have small beginnings, indeed.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, we have seen time and time again how this is true. On June 28, 1914, a single bullet from a single assassin which killed an otherwise unremarkable Austro-Hungarian Prince started World War I, which led directly to World War II, which led directly to our Cold War with Russia which still echoes in today’s political news. On December 17, 1903, on a small hill four miles south of Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, Orville and Wilber Wright made the first controlled, sustained flight of a powered, heavier-than-air aircraft; their propeller engine led directly to gas powered engines, which led to jet propelled vessels, which led directly to Sputnik satellite, the Mercury spacecraft, the American Space Shuttles, and the International Space Station which even now orbits 250 miles above us, pondering how mankind will one day travel beyond the moon. Meanwhile, in America, three of the most valuable and influential companies in the world—Amazon, Google, and Apple—were started in cramped one-room garages; today, their combined market value exceeds $2 ¼ trillion. Big things have small beginnings.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus tells His followers about the Kingdom of Heaven through two agricultural parables. In the first, He describes a farmer who plants his seed. Ordinary life passes by. Day by day and night by night, while the farmer sleeps and farmer awakens, without his understanding how, his crop grows and grows until it is time for the harvest. The farmer in the parable has no control over his crop’s growth— connected to the earth and drawing from it everything it needs, the crop simply grows and grows from seed to stalk, to head, and then to grain. Likewise, the Kingdom of God is something over which we have no control; being connected to God and drawing from Him everything that it needs, the Kingdom simply grows and grows around, among, and within us. In the second parable, Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a tiny mustard seed which, when sown, grows exponentially until birds can safely build nests in it. The introduction of even the smallest “anything” related to God eventually grows such that it changes the entire terrain and atmosphere. The smallest bit of truth grows and breaks down a tower of lies. The smallest bit of hope grows and purges leprous despair. The smallest bit of gratitude grows and drains oceans of resentment. The smallest bit of love grows and casts out all fear. The Kingdom of Heaven is a growing process, a developing course of events through which and by which God’s loving authority claims, shapes, redeems, sanctifies and perfects everyone and everything “on earth as it is in Heaven.” We do not understand how it grows, and we do not need to. All we need to do is to accept and harvest its grace. All we need to do is to move and orient our lives and relationships under its safety. Like seeds that germinate beneath the soil, we may not see that the Kingdom is there. Like bushes or trees that grow slowly, or even like bamboo that grows quickly, we may not—at any given moment—be able to observe how God’s Kingdom is growing. But because it comes from God and is always connected to and sustained by Him, it grows just the same. Big things, like the Kingdom of God, have small beginnings.

What does this Kingdom of God mean for us? What does it do? Sometimes it grows as a community, like the Universal Christian Church which began as a tiny, fragile collection of Jesus’ friends but, even in the face of strenuous resistance and persecution by the Roman Empire, in a little less than three centuries took over the Roman Empire. Sometimes it grows as a social movement, like the abolition of the American trans-Atlantic slave trade which actually began when four Quakers in the British colony of Pennsylvania signed a paper petition in 1688 and which culminated a century and a half later with the adoption of the 13th Amendment. Most often, however, the Kingdom of Heaven grows within a person through his relationship with another.

In the winter of 1934, the Rev. Sam Shoemaker received a request to meet with a parishioner. Fr. Shoemaker was the Rector of Calvary Episcopal Church near Gramercy Park in New York, a prolific author of over 30 books, and was considered one of the finest preachers of the era. The parishioner who sought to meet him was Bill Wilson, a failed stockbroker and alcoholic who had entered and failed treatments in hospitals numerous times. Bill described a spiritual awakening that had taken place during his last hospitalization, an epiphany of God’s presence, assurance, and love that was so intense that he felt a substantial change in his cravings. Being a writer, Shoemaker began to write notes about what he heard. When Bill finished , Shoemaker handed him his notes—these notes become important later in the story. About six months later, Bill was traveling in Akron, Ohio and began to feel the urge to drink again. Desperate for help, he called various Episcopal churches and asked if anyone could connect him with another alcoholic who could help him resist his urge. After several denials, he finally obtained the number of Bob Smith, a local surgeon and alcoholic who had sought and failed treatment over a dozen times. Bill called the man’s home, reached his wife, explained his situation, and asked if he could come visit her husband. She replied that as it was Mother’s Day, and that as she was looking at a beautiful arrangement of flowers that her thoughtful husband had bought and placed on the kitchen table, and that as she was also looking at her husband—who was passed out drunk under that same table, he should come by the next day. Bill did, and found a very surly Dr. Bob, who told Bill two things: he would meet with him for only fifteen minutes and Bill could not help stop him from drinking. Bill replied that was not there to help Bob stop drinking; he was there because he needed Bob’s help not to drink. What started as a fifteen-minute conversation began a six-hour session of honesty, clarity, and a mutual resolution not to drink for the rest of that day. Dr. Bob remained sober for one month, went on a bender for one night, woke up the next day to drink a beer to steady his hands for surgery, and never drank again for the rest of his life. That day was June 10, 1935: the founding day of Alcoholics Anonymous. Together, Bill and Bob began to reach out to other alcoholics who wanted to be helped, and four years later built a community of 100 men. Using the notes given by Fr. Shoemaker the previous year as a foundation, they published *The Big Book*, the text that features and unpacks the famous Twelve Steps which help keeps addicts sober for just one more day. Eleven years later, in 1950, that community of 100 men grew to 100,000. Twenty-five years later that number grew to 1,000,000. And today there are over 2,000,000 people in A.A., not counting the other millions in Narcotics Anonymous, Gamblers’ Anonymous, and any number of other programs that help people deal with their substance and behavioral addictions. St. Peter’s hosts an A.A. meeting every Tuesday evening, and we host an N.A. meeting every night of the week. All of that healing and recovery, of which you and I are a part, came about from the meeting of two men in Akron, Ohio in 1935, and that meeting came about from the meeting that Bill Wilson had with his Episcopal priest and his one page of notes about their conversation. All of those lives into which the Kingdom of Heaven have been planted and grown came from the smallest of seeds. But even the biggest things in the Kingdom of God have small beginnings.

The Kingdom of Heaven is still at work and still grows. It grows in the Church, it grows in the world, in grows in me, and it grows within you. Every single one of us carries a secret sorrow, an aching grief, a crushing burden, a hidden shame. But the kingdom grows just the same, and it is already at work and growing to claim, shape, redeem, heal, and transform whatever it is that is literally killing us. You and I may not see it right now. We may not perceive any kind of growth in our personal peace, comfort, relief, or freedom. But it grows just the same. And when we finally see it, when we finally perceive, know, and enjoy the healing grace and triumphant love that even works invisibly around, among, and within us, we will understand this: that big thing, that great thing, that joy for which every man, woman, and child has always yearned for began with the smallest of beginnings—one tiny baby in a cramped manger in a nowhere town called Bethlehem; one broken, bloody body on an ugly cross on a barren plain called Golgotha; one empty tomb on an ordinary morning in a small garden in Palestine. The Kingdom of Heaven is found in those things, and so are we. God’s great love is at work even in you. Big things have small beginnings.