

Answering the Call of the Kingdom

Today, we return to Matthew's Gospel after last week's brief excursion into the Gospel of John. Having heard that John the Baptist has been arrested, Jesus takes up John's famous proclamation: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Researching this morning's sermon, I discovered that I've probably misunderstood that declaration for as long as I've been reading the Bible. That doesn't happen very often, thank heaven, and plenty of other theologians have shared in my mistake. To correct that error, though, we need to talk about what Jesus and John the Baptist really meant, and why it matters today.

You may have noticed that Matthew refers to the "kingdom of heaven" and not the "kingdom of God," the phrase Mark and Luke both use. Bible scholar Douglas R. A. Hare believes that Matthew's choice of phrase reflects the ancient reverence for the divine name that is still part of modern Hebrew worship. When the word that is spelled יהוה appears in a sacred text, it's customary not to pronounce it as written. Instead, observant Jews substitute "Adonai," which means "our LORD." Referring to the Father as Adonai honors his divine authority over this world, which is key to understanding what the kingdom of heaven really is.

Perhaps it's the influence of too many fairytales or European history lessons, but when I hear the word "kingdom" I tend to think of a location, somewhere I can visit if my passport is current and the exchange rates are good. From that perspective, the kingdom of heaven is a supernatural realm with golden streets and pearly gates where angels flock to the Temple of God, all sorrows and tears are wiped away, and you can sit down for a good long talk with anyone from Abraham Lincoln to your late, great-aunt Betty. It's not a place you can visit during your earthly lifetime, but you sometimes catch a glimpse of it in dreams or, if you're lucky enough to be a character in a C.S. Lewis novel, by walking through the back of an enchanted wardrobe.

But when Jesus and John use the word “kingdom,” Professor Hare believes they’re talking not about a place, but about a circumstance. Because the Father is Adonai, LORD of all that was, is and ever shall be, Jesus and John intend “the kingdom of heaven” to mean the manifestation of Adonai’s “kingliness,” including his power to impose his divine will on whatever is happening on earth at any given moment. That’s why Jesus teaches us to pray “thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” The coming of the kingdom of heaven is God’s will being done not in some faraway celestial realm, but right here on God’s good earth.

And when Jesus and John say the kingdom of heaven has come near, they’re not talking about proximity in space – they’re talking about proximity in time. It’s akin to television announcers telling you to stay tuned through the commercial break because something you’ll want to watch is “coming up next.” When Jesus and John tell us that “the kingdom of heaven has come near,” they’re not saying that the next world is about to draw physically close to this one and, for a time, the veil between the worlds will become very thin. They’re saying, to quote Professor Hare, that “God is about to establish his rule among those who have treated his sovereignty with disdain.”

If that sounds a little ominous, it’s probably because too many Christian preachers have thundered from the pulpit for too long that God’s wrathful judgment is greatly to be feared. That’s probably true if you’re someone who routinely treats God’s sovereignty with disdain; even if you aren’t, it’s prudent to maintain a healthy respect for the God who created and, presumably, could demolish all things with a languid wave of his divine hand. Adonai is our LORD, not our lackey, and we owe him proper deference.

But as Matthew reminds us this morning, the coming of the kingdom of heaven is supposed to be good news. For the Hebrew people of Jesus’s time, that coming must have

seemed long overdue. Even their greatest earthly kings, David and Solomon, had failed to establish permanent peace and prosperity. The House of David had been brought low, conquered by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Then Rome conquered Judea, imposing Herod as its puppet king only a few decades before Jesus was born. Jesus's community must have prayed night and day for Adonai to step in and impose his will on their cruel foreign conquerors.

In proclaiming the kingdom, Jesus affirms that he is God's chosen Messiah, the one who will fulfill all the prophecies and enact God's will on earth. But, as we know, Jesus's life and ministry initially appears to end in disaster. Like John the Baptist, Jesus is arrested and brutally murdered by powerful men who want to silence them both. If that were the end of his story, we might think that the coming of the kingdom is a tragedy, not a divine triumph.

Thankfully, though, we know that Jesus's death *isn't* the end of the story. When God's will is done on earth, stupendous, restorative things happen, even if the road leading up to them seems unbearably hard and long. It was God's will to rescue the people not only from secular oppression, but from the spiritual oppression of sin and death. Jesus enacted God's will on earth, accomplishing that seemingly impossible task through his crucifixion and resurrection. The kingdom of Heaven came as promised, bringing Jews and Gentiles alike every reason to rejoice.

So, what does Jesus's proclamation mean for our time? If he really ushered in the kingdom of heaven, establishing God's rule over a suffering world, where is the kingdom now? Our world is still full of calamity and pain; even the most privileged among us can't entirely escape them. Is this really the way God wills our lives to be? That's a hard question that resists easy answers. However, there may be a clue in Matthew's story of Jesus walking by the Sea of Galilee as he calls to Andrew and Peter, then James and John. There may well have been other fishermen out that day, but Jesus chooses those four to be his disciples and *they choose him*.

That's more obvious in John's version of their meeting, where two of the disciples spend the whole day sizing Jesus up before bringing Peter to meet him. But even in Matthew's version, the fishermen have the choice to stay with their boats and ignore the rabbi calling them from shore. They have a choice every day as they follow him through his ministry, his arrest, and his death. They even have a choice to stay or go when they encounter Jesus resurrected, and when they choose to carry the good news of his Passion across the world. The disciples always had a choice, and so do we.

Two thousand years after Jesus and John the Baptist proclaimed the coming of the kingdom of heaven, there remains much work to be done to enact God's will in our world, and we have a choice in how to respond. We can let ourselves be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of that work. We can even tell ourselves that if God really wanted the world to be any better than it is, he would have fixed it long before now. But perhaps good, hard work in Jesus's name is the point. After all, Jesus himself didn't proclaim the kingdom of heaven, then sit back on a golden throne and watch as legions of angels set the world to rights. As Matthew tells us this morning, "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people." Our Messiah got his hands dirty long before he gave his life for us. Instead of throwing up our hands at the state of the world, perhaps we can choose to do whatever we can with whatever we have, considering it a privilege to play our small part in Adonai's great work to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth. Yes, there will be times when we become weary, anxious or sorrowful. Jesus experienced those times, too. But he continued calling the disciples to help him bring the kingdom of heaven to earth, and I believe he still calls us today. I pray that each of us will find in Jesus the strength and hope we need to answer yes. *Amen.*