
The Kingdom of God

Ezekiel 17:22-24; Mark 4:26-34

A sermon preached by Vicar Andy Hanawalt at Paradise Lutheran Church on 6/17/18

I mentioned last week that I'm really looking forward to working through "ordinary" time with you all this year. This really hit home for me this week when I began to get a little *excited* as I was scanning through the lectionary and seeing some of the texts we'd be looking at (I guess that officially marks me out as a "theology nerd"—as if you all didn't already know that). Some ordinary-time Sundays allow us to parachute back into the themes and stories that dominated Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, and Easter and remind ourselves of what we've experienced and learned, to help keep these things on our minds and in our hearts for the whole year. That's what happened last week when we read the story of Adam and Eve and focused on the nature of sin—it felt to me a little like being dropped back in the season of Lent.

But the ordinary-time readings also cover many stories and teachings that just don't fit neatly and easily into the great drama of Jesus's birth, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and sending of the Spirit. But there's *so much* important material in the Bible—*so much* that's really central to our Christian faith—that doesn't fit neatly and easily into any of the special seasons of the liturgical year.

In ordinary time, we get *a lot* of material about Jesus's early public ministry—the time between his baptism and temptation and his turn toward Jerusalem. This is when we focus on Jesus's preaching, his healing and miracles, his association with despised people on the margins of society, his disruption of norms about who's an insider and who's an outsider, and, like our reading today, his understanding of the *Kingdom of God*.

It sometimes seems to me that—maybe more than anything else in the Bible—much of the historic *and* modern Christian Church has lost the plot when it comes to thinking about the Kingdom of God. If you could find someone utterly unfamiliar with Christianity and get them to sit down and read Matthew, Mark, and Luke; and if you could then ask them to explain to you the gist of these books, they would probably say they have a lot to do with Jesus proclaiming, or demonstrating, or illustrating, or building, something called "the

Kingdom of God.”

They might not know exactly what Jesus meant by “The Kingdom of God,” but they could be forgiven for this—lots of Christians aren't too clear on what *they* understand it to mean either, and those who *are* clear don't necessarily agree with one another:

- Some think it refers to heaven;
- others to some future redeemed state of creation;
- others to a political and social order we can seek to bring about today;
- and some think it's some combination of these things (or something else altogether).

Why is this? How can it be that after over 2000 years of religion a concept so central to the gospels can still be so opaque, so unfamiliar, so cryptic? Why have other biblical concepts—like Jesus “dying for our sins”—generated doctrines almost every Christian would recognize immediately and *libraries* full of theology (careful and precise speculations about the exact mechanics of salvation), while in much of the Church the notion of the Kingdom of God is politely acknowledged and then promptly swept into the background and ignored?

I'm hoping that during ordinary time this year, we can look at some of these issues and try to really articulate and “build out” the way we think about the Kingdom of God. I'll try to focus on different aspects and applications of the notion of the Kingdom of God whenever I preach on a passage mentioning it. Think of it as a sermon series, but with its installments coming irregularly, periodically, based on whatever the lectionary readings happen to be, and stretching out over the whole period of ordinary time. Today, though, I'd like to just set down some general markers to help orient us before we dive any deeper into the Kingdom-of-God theme.

First, it's sometimes said that the Kingdom of God is a metaphor that's lost much of its meaning for modern Americans because we don't live with the concept of “kingship” anymore. Our country and many others are governed by systems of representative democracy, so talking about God as a “king” with a “kingdom” just doesn't pack the same rhetorical punch for modern people as it would have in the first century—or during the middle ages, or Renaissance, or the time of the Reformation.

A lot that can be said about this, and I'll try preach a more detailed sermon on it in the future. The bottom line though, is that with a little work, we *can* understand the Kingship metaphor and apply it to the modern world when we keep in mind a couple of things. First is that the notion of kingship has *always* been evolving and readers of the Bible throughout history have very often read their own society's default understanding of kingship back into the "Kingdom of God" metaphor. In 15th or 16th century France, for example, the notion of the Kingdom of God and the Kingship of God, would have been colored by the way that Kings were understood at that time—and their powers, functions, duties, manners, and origins, were significantly different than those of a biblical king of Israel. So living in a society governed in part or in whole by a king does not automatically give someone special insight into what Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God.

Instead of looking at modern notions of kingship we should try our best to understand what sort of images and associations that the "Kingdom of God" would have brought to the minds of Jewish people in first century. This is the only way we can begin to grasp what Jesus means by "the Kingdom of God." And we should also keep in mind that even to his *immediate* audience Jesus subverted and redefined the notion of kingly rule—turning it on it's head and preaching an "upside-down" kingdom where the first are last and the last are first, and where power is demonstrated not by lording it over people but by putting yourself under people and becoming a servant.

So Jesus' understanding of the Kingdom of God is not just difficult for us, who aren't used to living under the authority of a King, but it was difficult for his own disciples too, and it's been difficult for the Church in *every* generation, particularly after the Church and state united in the 4th century.

Jesus came into a world and came to a people who expected a messiah, a warrior king to represent God and to restore and lead a holy nation. A nation that would, in turn, act as God's instrument to restore and renew a broken humanity. But rather than leading the expected preparatory military and political revolution, Jesus condemns these things and jumps straight to the promised revolution in human nature, the restoration of human brokenness.

In his early ministry Jesus *shows* people what the restoration of the image of God in humanity looks like. He finds grace and self-giving universal love in the *spirit* underlying the Jewish law and he places that spirit over the letter of the law and its technical requirements *always*. He relentlessly turns established values on their heads when they conflict with the law's deeper spirit. And he and his followers *still* believe that he is the messiah, that he is *a king*. They don't

look at Jesus and say “well it turns out that this whole idea of kingship is a mistake, an artifact of sin, a human concept no longer operative now that God has come to dwell in our midst.” They don't just jettison the concept of kingdom and kingship, but instead **they radically reshape its contours to look like Jesus**. And this radical, Jesus-shaped kingship can be very relevant to our lives today if we let it.

The Kingdom focus we find in Jesus's public ministry is something we really get to sink our teeth into during this period of ordinary time (or as Ted and Pastor Rod put it a couple weeks ago. . . extraordinary time). During this green season, we'll try to grasp the *theological* significance of the healing and miracle stories, we'll explore Jesus's association with the poor with sinners, with lepers, and with people on the margins, we'll challenge ourselves—looking at the radical disruption of social and religious norms in Jesus's scandalous and paradoxical teaching about loving one's enemies. These are all—in one way or another—stories of renewal. Health is restored, purpose is rediscovered, lives are changed. This sort of renewal is at the very heart of Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God—something he talked about as *both* a present reality *and* also something that is *continuing* to come into fullness and fruition through him.

And at the center of this part of Jesus's ministry he taught us to pray that God's Kingdom come “on Earth as in Heaven.” Here at PLC, we try to live this prayer—in word, in service, and in sacrament. During this “ordinary” time, let's try to delve even deeper into all these things—both as individuals and together as a corporate body. So get ready, kingdom people! Get ready for an extraordinary time with God and with each other!

AMEN