

Jesus and the Kingdom of Heaven: Proper 11 Pentecost 6 Yr A:
Genesis 28:10-19; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

We sang as our processional hymn, “We are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder,” a favorite church camp song that, as a young person, I thought was a description of the Christian life: we are soldiers for Christ whose life’s purpose is to climb toward heaven, fighting all the way. Soldiering for Christ strikes a somewhat discordant note for me now. The Church and other religions have done too much fighting as a way to spread their version of the good news.

In our reading from Matthew about the good seed and the bad seed that grows into plants that threaten to crowd out the good plants, Jesus begins with the phrase “the kingdom of heaven may be compared to” and goes on to suggest that at some point there will be a sorting out of the good from the bad, with the good, the righteous, left in place to flourish in the Kingdom of Heaven. This parable is an allegory, and Jesus gives his interpretation of the parable. Most of Jesus’ parables are extended metaphors, and we are left with to discern possible meanings.

But this morning I want to talk about what may be the central message of Jesus’ teaching in the Gospel of Matthew, which we will be reading for the balance of the church year.

But what about the Kingdom of Heaven, which is Matthew’s terminology. The other gospels talk about the Kingdom of God. Is the Kingdom of Heaven different from the Kingdom of God? No, I don’t think so. God, in the cosmology of both Testaments, resides in heaven, so saying Kingdom of Heaven is another way to say “Kingdom of God”. The Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven are different names for the same thing.

Jesus, in the Gospel of Matthew, talks about the Kingdom of Heaven throughout the gospel. There are about 19 parables, and in 16 of them, Jesus says some variation of “The kingdom of heaven is like... or “In the kingdom of heaven...”. In addition, in Jesus non-parable talks with his disciples and the crowds, such as the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes frequent references to the Kingdom of Heaven. Indeed, if one looks at all of the gospels, it becomes evident that the Kingdom of God, is the heart of Christ’s teaching.

So if the Kingdom of God was so important for Jesus, where is it? The answer is a paradox: the Kingdom of God is already present, but it is yet to come. As followers of Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we experience the beginnings of life in Kingdom of God when we engage with our neighbors, listening to their stories, perhaps even accepting their offer of hospitality; when we invite a stranger to join with us for worship; when we support the homeless, or befriend a lost soul who comes to the Red Door. In these and hundreds of other ways, when we serve the lonely, the homeless, the hungry, the stranger, or work as stewards of creation, we are experiencing the Kingdom of God.

But you don’t need me to tell you that the kingdom of God is not here yet. As an inveterate newspaper reader for more than 60 years I have never seen a world so penetrated with tragedy, with so little feeling of hope. It seems the Kingdom of God is retreating, not coming. Yet in the

places that seem the darkest, like Gaza, the church and courageous people of good will are laboring to bring food, medical supplies, and hope.

In the Hebrew scriptures, there are frequent references to God's promise to restore all of creation to the way God intended it to be. Amidst our glimpses of the Kingdom that are overwhelmed at times by the tragedies that seem relentless, I find great comfort in the words of the prophet Isaiah:

For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice for ever
in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.
I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,
or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it
an infant that lives but a few days,
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.
They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat;
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.
They shall not labor in vain,
or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—
and their descendants as well.
Before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear.
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!
They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

In the language of poetry, that is the Kingdom of God about which Jesus constantly talked.

And where will the kingdom be? Again, the gospels all talk about the Kingdom of God as if it will be here on earth. This should not surprise us, since each time we pray the prayer the Lord's prayer, we pray that God's kingdom may come on earth as it is in heaven. The idea that the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven, will be here on earth was the consistent teaching of the Church from the time of Jesus until the Middle Ages.

Finally, what is the connection between the Kingdom of God and the Resurrection? Our reading from Paul's letter to the Romans includes this beautiful passage, (a passage I think I would like read should there be a memorial service after my death):

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it,

in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

For in hope we were saved.

What is Paul writing about? Not some escape to heaven at death, but rather, the promised renewal of all creation here on earth, when God will set aright what has gone terribly amiss. A part of that recreation, that renewal of God's creation, is the resurrection. In the language of Paul,

“If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.”

This recreation and resurrection are the coming Kingdom of God about which Jesus spoke continuously, a time when all creation will be set free from death and decay. Jesus, by his death and resurrection, freed us from the power of death to become a part of the new creation, here on earth, when the dead in Christ will be resurrected to join with the living followers of Christ.

I know this may raise questions about church teaching and, particularly, hymns about souls going to heaven when we die. All I can say is that souls going to heaven was not what Jesus, Paul, or the early church taught, and it was not a teaching of the church until the Middle Ages. Our hope, I suggest, is the Kingdom of God foretold by the Prophet Isaiah, talked about by Jesus in almost all of his parables and other teachings, and written about in the Epistles. It is a kingdom we will be a part of through Christ's victory over death and our Resurrection.

This all could be dismissed as theological speculation. But I think our theology shapes how we live our lives.

I worry constantly about what kind of natural world we will leave for our grandchildren. If we believe that with death we are done with the earth, we will be much less inclined to care for God's creation and more inclined to go along with the exploitation we see so much of. But if we believe God's promises about renewing and restoring creation, we are much more likely to see ourselves as stewards charged with caring for the earth.

As a kid I had to learn the catechism, and one question was “What is the chief end of

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man?" The answer, in the Westminster Catechism, was "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." John Douglas Hall, a preeminent contemporary church historian, in his book "Waiting for Gospel," suggest a revised answer: "The chief end of the human being is to be God's faithful steward in a profoundly threatened creation." I believe this is critical part of our calling as followers of Christ. Our hope is to be resurrected as a part of the Kingdom of God. Surely, as followers of Christ, we are and will be accountable for what we do to preserve our world for future generations and for the coming Kingdom of God.

Amen

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