

In Search of the Kingdom

Luke 17:20-37

Rev. Brett Shoemaker ~ April 28, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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²⁰ Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; ²¹ nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.”

²² Then he said to the disciples, “The days are coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. ²³ They will say to you, ‘Look there!’ or ‘Look here!’ Do not go, do not set off in pursuit. ²⁴ For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. ²⁵ But first he must endure much suffering and be rejected by this generation. ²⁶ Just as it was in the days of Noah, so too it will be in the days of the Son of Man. ²⁷ They were eating and drinking, and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed all of them. ²⁸ Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot: they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, ²⁹ but on the day that Lot left Sodom, it rained fire and sulfur from heaven and destroyed all of them ³⁰ —it will be like that on the day that the Son of Man is revealed. ³¹ On that day, anyone on the housetop who has belongings in the house must not come down to take them away; and likewise anyone in the field must not turn back. **32 Remember Lot’s wife.** ³³ Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it. ³⁴ I tell you, on that night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. ³⁵ There will be two women grinding meal together; one will be taken

and the other left.” ³⁷ Then they asked him, “Where, Lord?” He said to them, “Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.”

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One of the central themes of Jesus’ longest sermons is this: Seek first the Kingdom of God, and the all these things will be added to you.¹ If Jesus can make “seeking the kingdom of God” that important, then maybe we should spend some time on it as well. But hopefully, it won’t be my longest sermon. I don’t know. We’ll see.

When we hear the word “Kingdom”, it’s natural to begin to picture castles and crowns and battles [picture of Disneyland magic kingdom]. And our modern use of the word and the stories we tell reinforce this everyday.

In the Old Testament, it was understood that “Kingdom” did not refer to a place but to the overall rule and influence of a “King”. It was very rarely used to indicate a territory of some kind. So, from a biblical perspective, a good working definition would be: “God’s universal reign as Creator and Christ’s exhaustive work as Redeemer.”²

But we could just call it more simply: “The rule of God.”

I know I’m referencing a lot of movies today, but imagine this scene, familiar to many. A little girl is playing hide and seek with her brothers and sister in an old unfamiliar mansion. In one room, she hears footsteps approaching and she jumps into an old wardrobe to hide. She falls to

¹ Matthew 6:13.

² Whiting, Cortney. *What is the Kingdom of God?* www.ibelieve.com, Oct 1, 2018.

further in, expecting to find the wooden back, only she doesn't. She discovers that it opens out into a completely new world filled with beautiful lands and talking animals, heroes and villains, and new lessons to be learned about life every day.

C.S. Lewis, who wrote the Chronicles of Narnia, was not just a great storyteller that could draw in the attention of children and adults alike, but he wrapped every story in rich theology and deep truths. In this case, he has something important to say about the Kingdom, that I would say mirrors in a very visual way what Jesus was trying to communicate to the Pharisees and to his own disciples.

In this passage, Jesus is drawn in to this conversation about the Kingdom of God. At the beginning, the Pharisees want to know *when* the Kingdom of God was coming. At the end, the disciples want to know *where* it was coming. In the whole middle section, Jesus is not trying to answer when or where, but *how*. But first comes his curious statement, "The Kingdom of God is *among* you."

Because the Kingdom of God wasn't in every time and place. The Kingdom of God *entered* the world at the moment Jesus was born into it, for the purpose of beginning the final chapter of redemption for all the world. That's what we're celebrating in this Easter Season.

The Kingdom of God is among you.

Essentially Jesus is saying to his followers, "Look, I understand you've been waiting for the Messiah. You Pharisees are almost obsessed with trying to figure out when it will happen. You disciples are worried about being in the right place when it happens. But you're both asking the wrong question. The answer to when and where and how and even *why* the Kingdom of God is coming is in the simplest Sunday School answer of all time:

JESUS.

The Kingdom of God lies in the person and the ministry of Jesus. Which is to say to his listeners, *it's right now while I am in your presence, and it's for all time, because I'm just getting started. I will die soon...for all of you...but I will return to make everything sad and painful come untrue because I am still on the throne.*

As a pastor, I would certainly not pretend to know all of the mystery surrounding the Kingdom of God. But Jesus has answered these questions in such a way that I think I can say with certainty that it is about at least three things.

FIRST:

...and foremost, the Kingdom of God is not about us.

When Lucy entered Narnia, she realized that this world was far bigger than that little wardrobe. There was a story being told that was timeless. Ages and ages would pass, and upon return, no time had passed. God's story has happened, is happening, and will happen forever...all at the same time somehow.

So often we feel that we need to turn every Scripture passage into a life lesson for us. Sometimes, there isn't a lesson for us. It's just for us to sit and be in awe of who God is. Jesus is telling the Pharisees that it doesn't really matter when it happens. Just be ready. It's God's story.

One of the most quoted Scriptures is Jeremiah 29:11: *For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*

We usually use this to say that God is going to take care of everything in our lives right now. We're going to get that job we're applying for, get that A on the test, make that team, fall in love with the right person. All because of this verse. But listen Jeremiah 29:10 that comes before: *This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place.*

That doesn't get quoted as often. The people for who this promise applies will have to wait 70 years to see it fulfilled. How many of us are that patient. God's plan is bigger than us—bigger than our dreams that we place on God.

But in a way, it makes the verse better. It brings us together as God's people to claim that *no matter what happens, we know God is faithful, and we're going to sing his praises regardless of what happens.*

And then...and then...tragedy in Sri Lanka on Easter morning. Hundreds of children included in the loss of life. And we want to ask if God is still faithful. We want to shout at God and ask like the Pharisees, "When is the Kingdom of God coming!?" I have no answer except to say that we need to hold on tight to each other and continue to pray and proclaim that it IS coming.

In fact, I'd love to take just a few seconds of silence to remember those people that lost their lives in Sri Lanka last Sunday, and mourn for a moment with the survivors.

...

Jesus taught us to pray together the Lord's prayer: "Your Kingdom come God. Your will be done God." After all of our attempts to pray, it's your purpose that will come through.

BUT SECOND:

It may not be about us, but we are most definitely involved.

Lucy is drawn into Narnia and within 5 minutes meets Mr. Tumnus, a talking fawn who tells her how important she is to this story, one of the daughters of Eve after all!

In this one wardrobe image, C.S. Lewis weaves together the cosmic story of God's Kingdom with the personal nature of God's Kingdom.

When Jesus says the Kingdom is among you, he is offering himself in personal relationship to

each person listening. The Kingdom of Heaven is about God, but it's about a God that loves his church and loves his creation and wants us to have the joy of knowing God like this.

One of the parables Jesus tells is that the Kingdom of Heaven is about a man who finds a treasure in a field. He re-hides it, goes and sells everything and buys the field that holds the treasure.³ Why? *In his joy!* His joy is so great that he doesn't even tell anyone at first. It has become personal. He wants to just sit with the joy, answer this call that God gives to him.

One question Jesus is asking is: *Are you really seeking God's Kingdom first?* Many of us have had experiences of joy in Christ. We can remember life-changing moments in which God first became real. But right now, the search is kind of...over...we've stopped looking.

This week, I have the opportunity to go up to Zephyr Point at Tahoe for a pastor's conference. I am convinced that I need to spend some time searching for the treasure in the field, recovering that unashamed joy in Christ.

So maybe this message is just for me. But I highly doubt that. Perhaps there is one intentional way that you can offer God some time and space in as ordinary a spot as your own living room...or your own wardrobe...and begin to really pray again and let God be as close as he longs to be.

THIRD:

Seek the unfamiliar and be surprised by the Kingdom.

Here's what I mean by this. So often we come to church, or we sit down to pray or read God's Word, and we only get what we expect, which, if we are honest, is not much.

If you are playing hide and seek, and you only look in the expected spots, or worse, you only

³ Matthew 13:44-45.

hide in the expected spots, it's not a very interesting game.

God has so much to show us. Unexpected things. Amazing things. Jesus didn't tell us to "seek" God's Kingdom because God made it really hard to find. We're supposed to seek, because when we do we find unexpected things.

The most difficult people in the world to speak kind words to are the ones that we love the most. Why is that? Have you wondered why? I don't have an answer. But a friend gave me a tip I don't use enough. In any given conversation with your parent, or your child, or your sibling, or someone else you know really well, pretend that you just met. I mean, you still want to hang on to the memories and connectedness, of course, but treat them with that kind of courtesy and patience.

When you do this, something changes in the words you choose, and the way you say them.

I have a similar tip for you that I think Jesus would agree with. Every day, *pretend* like you just woke up and discovered who God is for the first time!

Read the Bible as if you hadn't heard the story before.

Pray like you just found out the God of the universe is listening and answering.
Live as if the Kingdom of God is among you!

Next week we're reading the story of the 10 lepers that were healed. The youth are going to walk us through that passage. Spoiler alert: 1 leper comes back. A Samaritan. Why is that important? He is the foreigner. Because he is a foreigner, he's surprised by what God can do. Maybe we need to *pretend* (until we realize we're not pretending anymore) that God has something new for us.

Lamentations is a book in the Bible that some call the *Book of Complaints*. It's great because it really just cries out to God and never feels apologetic about it. *There's nothing new under the sun...* There is usually no resolution to tie it up

neatly, it just complains—refreshingly human. But still, here is this verse tucked in there, the one we started with this morning:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.⁴

What a great way to start the day!

I really wanted to keep this to three tidy points, but I couldn't ignore this FOURTH theme:

Consider this a bonus, but it's just as certain as the other three. In fact, I didn't even think it was reflected in this passage, but maybe the last line hints at it: The place where the vultures gather—those who are marginalized and cast aside for dead.

The Kingdom of God gathers around the children, the broken, the vulnerable...

*The Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these...
When you have done it to the least of these, you've done it to me...
The first shall be last and the last shall be first...
Blessed are the poor in Spirit, the meek, the hungry...*

Should I go on? No, or it would be my longest sermon. I don't think you can talk about the Kingdom of God without talking about the people around us that make us uncomfortable. They are the ones that Jesus spent the most time with:

tax collectors—prostitutes—mentally ill—
sinners--the lost
the children--the lepers--the poorest of the poor
the deaf and the blind--the prisoners—you and I.

Because if we're honest, we're all broken...this includes every one of us.

This is the Kingdom of God.

⁴ Lamentations 3:22-23.

And we are all invited.

Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed.

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Luke 17:20-37 again together. What stands out to you in this passage?
2. Jesus attempts to answer questions about the Kingdom of God of "When?", "How?", and even "Where?" it will come. What do we learn about the Kingdom of God from his answers?
3. In Matthew 6:33, Jesus says to seek first the Kingdom of God. What exactly should we be looking for? How will we know when we find it?
4. In what sense was the Kingdom of God present in the Person and ministry of Jesus? In what sense is the Kingdom of God present today?
5. What signs of the Kingdom of God do you see around you?
6. How do we make Jesus too big to be personal or too small to be Lord of all creation? Which of these two is your tendency?
7. Jesus points out that there is both a present and a future aspect to the Kingdom of God? What implications does this have for us?
8. What are some ways that we look in the wrong place for the Kingdom of God? Where are the unmistakable places we can find it?

Table to Table

A question for kids and adults to answer together

What do you think the Kingdom of God is?
 Read Matthew 13:44. What does this say about what the Kingdom of God is like?