

Jesus' Prayer: Kingdom Come

Isaiah 61:1-3 (Common English Bible)

The Lord God's spirit is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim release for captives, and liberation for prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and a day of vindication for our God, to comfort all who mourn, to provide for Zion's mourners, to give them a crown in place of ashes, oil of joy in place of mourning, a mantle of praise in place of discouragement.

Luke 4:16-21 (Common English Bible)

Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been raised. On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as he normally did and stood up to read. The synagogue assistant gave him the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him. He began to explain to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it."

Luke 17:20-21 (Common English Bible)

Pharisees asked Jesus when God's kingdom was coming. He replied, "God's kingdom isn't coming with signs that are easily noticed. Nor will people say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' Don't you see? God's kingdom is already among you."

At the end of World War II, Helmut Thielicke, a German Protestant pastor, was preaching to his congregation in Stuttgart. Germany was in ruins, as was their old church. Not a single person in the congregation was untouched by war. Most lost their homes, their businesses, and their loved ones. Thielicke preached on the Lord's Prayer.

When he came to the phrase "Thy kingdom come," he asked, "How can these words have any meaning for us, in this wretched condition? The truth is we can understand the need for the kingdom now better than we ever could before. Before, our lives were safe, happy, well ordered... But now we see how deceptive appearances were. Now the telephone wires are down, the hospitals are bombed out, and there is no food or medicine. Now there is just us and God." Then he declared, "The greatest mysteries of God are always enacted in the depths"

"The greatest mysteries of God are always enacted in the depths." Isaiah the prophet understood this truth. In the sixth century BCE he preached God's great mystery of hope to the people of Israel captive in Persia. Israel's land laid in ruins. Her king and temple gone. Her economic situation bankrupt. Her society infested with injustice and idolatry.

In the depths of such destruction and despair, Isaiah said the time was coming when God would rescue the people from captivity. He painted a picture of God's coming kingdom - a beautiful

picture of renewal and restoration, of hope and joy, of comfort and healing, of freedom and good fortune.

Jesus identified with this picture of God's kingdom when he began his ministry. Visiting his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, he was given the honor of reading the sacred scroll for the day. He opened the scroll to this passage from Isaiah 61. He read the same words that Susanna read this morning. He handed the scroll back to the attendant, and sat down. Everyone watched and listened. Jesus said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Now that may sound comforting to us, but it didn't reassure the residents of Nazareth. In the rest of Luke's story, they demand evidence. If God's kingdom had come in their midst, they wanted a sign. But Jesus refused to provide one. The people got mad and tried to kill Jesus by throwing him off a cliff outside of town. In the end Jesus escaped their wrath and walked away.

We hear about their reaction and think how foolish they were. Why didn't they believe that God's kingdom had come? Why couldn't they see that the scripture was fulfilled? But has it? Has God's kingdom really come into this world, into your life and mine? Isaiah announced good tidings to the poor, binding up of the broken hearted, freedom for all who are captive, joy for those who mourn, and revitalization for all who are weak and despairing of life.

Have any of these wonderful things become a reality in this world and in our lives? Or isn't the reality that disease, poverty, injustice, and idolatry run rampant and crush people lives and spirits? Where's the evidence of the coming of God's kingdom? Where's the proof of God's work? Where are the signs of God's rule?

Later in Jesus' ministry, a group of religious leaders asked when the kingdom of God was coming. Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among (or within) you" (Luke 17:20-21).

The kingdom of God is among or within you. Isn't that's strange? According to Jesus, the kingdom of God is not something external that we wait on. It is within us and among us, waiting to be born on earth as it is in heaven. When we pray "Thy kingdom come," we are not making a request. We're taking a vow. We are pledging our willingness to allow God's kingdom to be established in and through us.

When Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36), he was reminding us that the kingdoms of this world are not the kingdom of God. There are lots of competing kingdoms: dictatorships and democracies, socialism and capitalism, corporations and religions. In the midst of these many kingdoms, it's difficult to discern God's kingdom. But we're not without help because Jesus provided us some clues. He described God's kingdom in many ways. He said "the kingdom of God is like ..." on more than one occasion.

Jesus compared God's kingdom to everyday ordinary things. It is like a tiny mustard seed which sprouts and grows and becomes a tree where the birds build their nests. It's like a net, sunk down

in the water where we can't see it. But we pull it in and it's full of fish. It's like yeast that a woman hides in the flour. You don't notice it, but the dough rises and the loaf is ready to bake.

God's kingdom is small and easy to miss, yet endowed with great power. God's kingdom has a hidden presence. There's nothing in the morning paper or on the evening news that would make you think it's here. Unless you have eyes of faith and can see the signs.

In his book, The Upside-Down Kingdom, Donald Kraybill suggests "the kingdom of God points to an inverted, or upside-down, way of life that contrasts with the prevailing social order." In this upside-down kingdom: the first shall be last and the last shall be first, he exalted will be humbled and the humbled will be exalted, sinners are forgiven and welcomed while the self-righteous are chastised, the poor are blessed and the rich are condemned, the lost are found and the dead are made alive, the lion lays down with the lamb and spears are beaten into pruning hooks.

Conventional wisdom and common sense are not signs of God's kingdom. It's the very opposite of what we expect. It's a kingdom founded on grace rather than works, grounded in love rather than legalism, and open to all rather than to a few. And most importantly, it's a kingdom most concerned about those who have been ignored, neglected, and oppressed.

Jesus said it's harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. He knew when you're on top of the mountain, you don't want the mountains and alley to be leveled. It's the poor and oppressed, the sick and dying who really pray for the kingdom. The rest of us want it to come, but not now. We want it to come, but not in us. Our structures, our way of life, our systems are comfortable and enjoyable. We don't want to mess with them.

So how do we say this part of the Lord's Prayer and mean it? Is Jesus saying that we have to become poor, blind and deaf? Maybe – we at least have to care enough about the poor and oppressed to ask for the kingdom on their behalf. We have to begin to share our lives with them, interact with them, minister with them. That's what God's kingdom is about: a community of love in which we all try to do God's will, the way the angels in heaven do, a community of peace in which we love our enemies, go the second mile and share everything as if it belonged to others and not to us, a community of hope in which we live as if Isaiah and Jesus were right and God's kingdom is already a reality.

Lucius Newsom was part of such a community. In his retirement, he felt called to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. He decided Jesus was serious when he said, "When you do it for the least of these, then you do it for me." This elderly man living on a fixed income began to fill his van with food and clothes and share the little he had with people in need in his community.

A church in the area heard about what Lucius was doing. They decided to give him money and help buy food and clothes. The head of the mission committee took a check to Lucius one Saturday. He arrived to find Lucius setting up tables in a vacant lot, placing food and clothes out for people to take. He was surrounded by people patiently waiting to receive his help. The committee chair walked up to Lucius and handed him the check.

Lucius wouldn't accept it. He said, "I don't need your money. I need your hands. But if you want to stay here and help me serve these people, I'd be obliged." That's what the kingdom of God looks like. That's what it means to pray, "Thy kingdom come".

Several months later Lucius accepted that financial gift. He observed the hearts of those volunteers and learned that they weren't acting out of guilt or pride. Like him, they were only interested in establishing God's kingdom.

"Thy kingdom come..." Establishing God's kingdom doesn't require lots of money or people. It happens in seemingly small and insignificant ways. It appears in unexpected and unusual places. It occurs when ordinary people like you and me act in ways that are counter to the kingdoms of this world.

Isaiah and Jesus were right. God's kingdom is coming and it's already here. It's being established in and through us. That's why praying "Thy kingdom come" is so radical and so personal. When you and I pray it, we are asking that it come in us, that God use us to help make it a reality.

"Thy kingdom come..." Be careful what you pray for! It will change your life and this world!

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