

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Third Sunday after Epiphany- January 21, 2007

Scripture lessons: Psalm 71:1-6 & Mark 1:14-15

BRINGING IN THE KINGDOM

Last week we dwelled on the gospels' portrait of Jesus as our Teacher or Rabbi. In his day, Jesus was a Rabbi with a difference. Others never recruited their followers, but he did. Jesus actively called people to be his disciples- wanting them before they wanted him, choosing them before they chose him, believing in them before they believed in him.

He wants, chooses, and believes in us now. We're his disciples today and we want, choose, and believe in him. Our aim is to become like him, to follow him so closely that we'll be covered by his dust, the dust of our Rabbi.

As we do, *what* does Jesus teach us? Last week we focused on the fact that he was and is our Teacher. This week we start honing in on the content of his teaching.

We go back and listen with those who first heard him. Mark's gospel points to the core of Jesus' message as he begins his public ministry. In his chapter 1, Mark says, "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'" (verses 14-15). Those verses give the main thrust of Jesus' teaching. He announces that God's Kingdom has come near. He calls for repentance as the right response to it.

Jesus' message certainly grabbed the attention of those who first heard it. It was obvious to *every* Jew of his day that God's Kingdom had *not* come near for a very long time. In their understanding, God's Kingdom come would mean at the very least that they, as God's Chosen People, would know again the glory they had enjoyed during the reign of King David. At bare minimum, it would mean that they once more would be a strong, free, and prosperous people. Yet for centuries they had been ruled by a series of pagan and foreign oppressors. First it was the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, then the Persians, then the Greeks, and now the Romans.

It's difficult to exaggerate how wrong all of this seemed to the Jewish people. How could it be that they, as those who knew and were in special relationship with the one, true God, could be ruled for so long by such a gaggle of imperial pretenders, all of whom worshiped false gods? This question pressed them even harder as Roman emperors like "the Divine Augustus Caesar" started to proclaim themselves as gods. This was *not* the way it was supposed to be, and yet it was! Why?

Among Israel's leaders it was widely held that the Jewish people themselves had gone badly astray. Their sorry condition was seen as God's punishment for their sin. Many agreed with Jesus that there must be a strong connection between the people's need for repentance and the arrival of God's Kingdom. But they did *not* agree on the *kind* of repentance that was needed. *In what way* did the Chosen People need to change? That was a matter of serious dispute.

The Zealots, for example, argued that the Jewish people had become too passive and cowardly. They insisted it was time to buck it up, to become more daring and assertive, to take up arms and start slitting some Roman throats. They believed if enough people finally had the nerve to launch a violent revolution, then everyone soon would see that God would step in. God would arrive to uphold their righteous cause and give them the victory like David over Goliath.

Another leading group, the Pharisees, had a different idea. They believed God's kingdom would come only if Israel started to observe much more rigorously *all* of God's Torah laws. To them, this meant strict adherence even to highly detailed rules on very specific matters like keeping the Sabbath and maintaining ritual purity. They became well-known for their own rigid obedience to such rules, but also for their dismay over how few others joined them in it. If only

more people would meet the same high standards they did, then surely God would come and set things right. But as far as the Pharisees could see, there were just too many sinners!

A third leading group, the Essenes, thought along lines similar to those of the Pharisees, but took their views to a wild extreme. They believed Israel had become so corrupt that in order for the nation truly to repent a faithful minority would have to withdraw from the society completely. So they moved out into the desert to form their own separate community at Qumran. They felt that only a total separation could provide the conditions they'd need to achieve the extraordinary level of purity that they were sure God demanded. Once their little remnant had achieved such purity they were confident God's kingdom would come. God would lead them into a final battle as "the sons of light" against all the "sons of darkness". Like the Zealots, the Essenes were prepared to get violent. They only wanted to wait until God led them into it.

The Herodians and the Sadducees made up the fourth and final major leadership group. They came primarily from among the aristocrats, the priests, and the elders. They had worked out an arrangement with the Romans through which they were able to organize and administer the Temple and its system of sacrifices. Even though they felt humiliated by having to gain Rome's approval, they still believed the continuation of those ancient and central religious institutions of the Jewish people was *the* most important thing.

This meant that they were often made nervous by the Zealots, the Pharisees, and the Essenes. They were afraid those groups' ideas about repentance, each in their own way, could pose too much of a threat to Rome. They feared the Romans might then decide simply to crush Israel and destroy the Temple. How could any of that help to bring God's kingdom any nearer? The Herodians and the Sadducees favored *not* rocking the boat.

Into this complicated mix Jesus brought his own distinctive message about God's kingdom coming and about the need for repentance. This mix was not only complicated- it was also highly volatile. Palestine in Jesus' day probably was about as calm as Palestine is today, i.e., *not very calm*.

All four of the leading Jewish groups contended passionately against each other. The Zealots would cut a few Roman throats and the Herodians and Sadducees would decry how stupid and reckless they were. The Zealots in turn would ridicule the Herodians and Sadducees for being so willing to serve as Rome's lackeys. The Pharisees, in their turn, would scold both groups and the rest of the population, too, for not being obedient enough to all of God's laws. The Essenes in the desert would denounce everyone who wasn't in their group and look forward to the day when God would lead them in wiping out all of the "sons of darkness".

Those harsh tensions were infused with an even stronger antagonism towards Rome. Rome's occupation of Israel was brutal, cruel, and efficient. Most Jews suffered miserably under it and hated Rome for it. Furthermore, the Romans were Gentiles, and Jews generally considered Gentiles to be morally and spiritually bankrupt. You might as well throw pearls to pigs as try to talk to a Gentile about God.

The Romans, of course, returned the Jews' disdain tit for tat. They looked upon the Jews in a manner similar to the way many Westerners look at Arabs today- as incompetent religious fanatics who were endlessly quarrelsome. In other words, intense feelings of contempt ran in multiple directions throughout 1st century Israel.

Jesus introduced into this cauldron an element that raised the stakes even higher for his people.

St. Luke's first story of Jesus' proclamation of God's kingdom coming illustrates this sharply. In Luke, chapter 4, Jesus is early in his public ministry when he returns home to Nazareth for a visit. He enters its synagogue on the Sabbath and is given the scroll of the prophet, Isaiah, to read. He opens it to the place where it's written and from which he reads, saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor . . . to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (verses 18-19).

The villagers of Nazareth know this passage well. They know that it goes on to say, “They shall build up the ancient ruins . . . they shall repair the ruined cities . . . you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations and in their riches you will glory” (Isaiah 61:4, 6). The Nazarenes recognize this as one of their Scriptures’ beautiful promises that one day God’s kingdom will come and when it does their fortunes will be fabulously restored.

Jesus then says to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Try to imagine this. Can it be? This prophet from their hometown is telling them that “the year of the Lord’s favor” at last has arrived?! This is great news, out-of-this-world-almost-too-good-to-be-true news! But there it is, and Jesus has delivered it. It’s no wonder, as Luke says, that all the people of Nazareth “speak well” of him.

They speak well of him, but not for long since it turns out Jesus has more to say to them. He recalls for them some other parts of their Scriptures- a couple of stories from the books of Kings. In one of them, during a time of terrible famine in Israel, God had sent the prophet Elijah right past the doors of starving Israelite widows and right into the home of a starving Gentile widow in order to care for and live with her (I Kings 17). In the other story, during a time when many Israelites were suffering from leprosy, God had sent the prophet, Elisha, to an enemy Syrian general named Naaman. Elisha had healed Naaman of his leprosy, but had left Israelite lepers alone.

What is Jesus’ point with all of this? He wants his hometown folk to understand the new element he will insist upon in *his* proclamation of God’s kingdom come. Jesus knows the prevailing assumption among his people is that the arrival of God’s kingdom will mean great blessing for them, but terrible judgment for almost everyone else. He wants them to know- “Not so fast with that.”

He wants them to realize that God’s kingdom come intends blessing for *everyone*, even the people they’re most prone to hate. It doesn’t matter whether those people are in their own community or outside of it. Do they hate Zealots or Pharisees or Essenes or Herodians or Sadducees? Do they hate those who don’t keep God’s law as well as they do? Do they hate those who keep God’s law better than they do? Do they hate the Romans? Do they hate all Gentiles?

Whomever they hate, Jesus says it’s time to let it go. God’s kingdom is coming near in him to bring blessing to *all*. The only way to be left out of it is to want it only for you and your own kind. If you want it that way, then you’ll bring the kingdom’s judgment upon yourself. You’ll exclude yourself from it because it will *include* so many people that you can’t stand.

It turns out that the good folks in Nazareth do not like Jesus’ challenge to their traditional assumption. When he reminds them of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath and of Elisha and the Syrian general, Naaman, it makes them want to kill him. Luke 4, verses 28 to 30 say, “When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But (Jesus) passed through the midst of them and went on his way.”

We enlightened 21st century Haslett Community Church types might be tempted to look down on the rage of these murderous Nazarenes with a kind of patronizing pity. We might think to ourselves, “Those poor, narrow saps from such a bygone and benighted era. It’s too bad they couldn’t see like us that God really does love everyone.”

Yet it takes only a little imagination to translate their scene into our own world. Christian writer Tim Stafford suggests that we “Imagine a similar scene in Palestine today. Suppose an imam, preaching in a present-day Palestinian mosque, announces that he has a vision for the fulfillment of Palestinian dreams for a homeland. Suppose he shows through his reading of the Koran that this plan will begin with Allah showing his favor and blessing to the Israelis. How would his audience like that? Such an imam might get himself killed.

. . . (Or) imagine . . . a yeshiva student preaching (today) in an Orthodox settler synagogue (on the West Bank), saying that the God of Abraham wants to pour out his blessing on the Palestinians . . . (Or) a Serbian Orthodox priest . . . (offering) bless(ing) (to) local Muslims . . .

(Or) a Sri Lankan Buddhist monk proclaiming that the Tamil Tigers represent the Buddha's spirit better than his own Sinhalese community . . . (Or) a fundamentalist preacher telling his congregation that God is blessing gay activists and liberals instead of them."

Or, I'll add, let's imagine a liberal, gay activist preacher telling his congregation that God is blessing fundamentalists instead of them, or a Christian Republican standing up at his party's national convention to say that God's blessing is upon the Democrats' presidential nominee instead of theirs, or a Christian among the Democrats telling her national gathering that God's blessing is upon the Republicans' nominee instead of theirs. Or either of them standing up and telling all of us Americans that God loves every Iraqi and Iranian, every member of al Qaeda and the Taliban, every single North Korean just as much as God loves us. Can we imagine any of those scenarios starting to raise our ire?

Maybe not- but what if Jesus came into our worship this morning and said he wanted to talk to each of us about the way we spend our money? What if he said that he didn't want to hear anything from any of us about how much we loved God or all of God's children except through what he could see in our checkbooks? Might that raise our hackles a bit? Might we think it was none of Jesus' business and tell him to bug off? If we did, what do we think he'd say to us in return? Something perhaps about, "It looks like it's still easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God?"

This past week our nation celebrated the birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It's worth remembering that no one seemed to have much of a problem with him when he was a graduate student studying theology at Boston University. But a lot of people started having big problems with him once he took what he'd learned back to Montgomery, Alabama and started acting as though the lessons he'd been given had something to do with where African-Americans could sit on a bus or where they could eat their lunch or whether they could vote.

I suspect there really is something of the people of Nazareth in all of us. There's something in every one of us that's ready to huff and puff and blow down anyone who dares seriously and specifically to challenge us to love God and *all* of God's children much more than we do.

But our case is more difficult because we have determined *to follow Jesus*. Our aim is to be covered with his dust, to become more and more like him- which means we're committed to saying "No!" to that part of us that's like the people of Nazareth when they wanted to throw their hometown boy off a cliff. We're committed to saying, "Yes!" to Jesus' kingdom proclamation that keeps challenging us to love everyone so much more than we actually do.

But the more we keep saying yes to that, the more we will be able to stand tall and walk peacefully, just like Jesus did, through any raging crowd that might mean us harm. We remember that Martin Luther King, Jr. and his followers were able to do it. We remember how they sat calmly at those Woolworth lunch counters even when hostile white folks poured drinks over their heads. We remember how they stayed calm and steady even when police jammed them into those crowded paddy wagons and overstuffed jail cells. We remember how they kept marching peacefully and purposefully across the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma even when those billy clubs started to fly. We remember how they kept walking in the way of love for all even when others called them troublemakers and were ready to kill them for it.

They could do all of that because for a long time they had been saying yes to *Jesus'* call to repentance. They could do it because they were joining with *him* to bring in God's kingdom. They could do it and we can, too, because like them we're being covered with the dust of our Rabbi. Amen.

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