

Finding the Kingdom of God
Deuteronomy 6:4 – 5
Luke 18:9 – 14
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
October 23, 2016

Introduction

Most of the time my sermon messages are exegetical. We pick a scripture passage and work our way through it verse by verse. Today's message is more of a meditation on a key biblical idea: The Kingdom of God. A few moments ago we prayed **The Lord's Prayer** together. The third petition of the Lord's Prayer is this: "*Thy Kingdom come.*" What do we mean by this prayer? How does The Kingdom of God come to us?

In praying in the Lord's Prayer the words "Thy Kingdom come:" the first thing we note about the Kingdom of God is to acknowledge that its arrival is not something we accomplish. The Kingdom of God is not subject to our approval. The Kingdom of God is not about us. It is about God.

The Bible teaches the reality of the Kingdom of God in three distinct spheres. First, the Kingdom of God is revealed in the created order, in the universe. God is creator of all that is. Second, God's kingdom is also evident in God's unseen heavenly realm. We pray in the Lord's prayer that *God's will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.* The third arena of the Kingdom of God are God's purposes unfolding in human history. God is at work in our world, in the rise and fall of nations and in the work of Christ and his church. We will first look briefly at each of these three spheres, after which we will come back and look at the unfolding of the Kingdom of God in history in a little more detail.

First, the Kingdom of God is seen in God's kingdom power over the universe itself. It is God himself who holds the universe together.

Universe – God's kingdom power – Colossians 1:17

¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

The late Christian philosopher, **Francis Schaeffer**, would speak about the modern world's attempt to *close the universe*. This is a very helpful image. The modern world wishes to create a world in which God is not mentioned. God is not acknowledged. Indeed, for many in the modern world, the very mention of God is deemed offensive. Eileen Fox sent to me a poem published this past week in the Daily Local. Here are two of the verses this unnamed poet writes,

Now I sit me down in school
Where praying is against the rule
For this great nation under God

Finds mention of him very odd.

Our hair can be purple, orange or green,
That's no offense; it's a freedom scene.
The law is specific; the law is precise.
Prayers spoken aloud are a serious vice.

The modern world wants to sweep the world of every trace of biblical religion. In banning reference to God from our government run educational system the belief and hope is to create a world in which God is not so much rejected, but irrelevant. This is one reason why *faith* in evolution is so essential to modern secularists. Evolution provides a way to 'explain' the world *without* having to acknowledge God's existence or purpose. Faith in evolution is the lynchpin of the secular alternative explanation of a world without God, of why the world is as it is.

In contrast, the biblical message states that the universe was created at God's command. The universe is sustained by God's on-going purpose. The universe is not closed. God is real. He is not silent. Creation is held together by the will of God. As Paul puts it in his letter to the church at Colossae, "*in him all things hold together.*" Any attempt to explain creation independent of an acknowledgment of God's creatorship is, in the end, an act of vain futility.

This is the first arena of the Kingdom of God: creation itself. The second sphere is the heavenly realm, where God is seen in all his majesty and glory.

Heaven – God's majesty and glory – Psalm 93:1 – 2

The LORD reigns; he is robed in majesty;
the LORD is robed; he has put on strength as his belt.
Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved.
2 Your throne is established from of old;
you are from everlasting.

In the **Nicene Creed** we confess we believe *in all that is, seen and unseen*. It is a little difficult to grow exceedingly enthused about what we cannot see and can only imagine with difficulty. But we must always remember: there is a heavenly realm. There is more to life than what we can encounter and know through our five senses.

The Bible uses the image of the heavens in three distinct senses. The first heaven is the sky. It is the place where birds fly. The *second* heaven in biblical teaching is the place where the sun, the moon and the stars' shine. This is what we would call *space*. The third use of heaven in biblical teaching is the unseen world of the heavenly court. This is the heaven where God dwells. This is the realm of the unseen, of God's unfolding purposes in human history.

How do you describe an unseen world? To do so, you must use images and metaphors pointing to spiritual truths and realities. As you recall from our study of it, the

book of Revelation is filled with such fabulous imagery in order to convey spiritual truth. Here is John's description of what he sees when he peers into the heavenly realm (4:2 – 8).

² At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne.

³ And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. ⁴ Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. ⁵ From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, ⁶ and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: ⁷ the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. ⁸ And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say,

“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come!”

The Kingdom of God exists in three spheres. The first is God's authority over his creation. The second, the Kingdom of God exists in the heavenly realm. The third sphere refers to God's activity in time, the work of God's grace in history.

History – God's grace – Exodus 20:1 -3

And God spoke all these words, saying, ²“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ³“You shall have no other gods before me.

Exodus 20 (and Deuteronomy 6) are the places in scripture where the Ten Commandments are spoken by God. It is important to remember the context for the giving of the Ten Commandments. God has rescued the people of Israel from slavery and bondage in Egypt. He has brought them to Mt. Sinai. Moses brings the message of the Ten Commandments, prefacing them saying, (20:2) “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. God does not simply speak the Ten Commandments from on high, from heaven. God has already been active in the lives of his people, the Jews, bringing them from their state of bondage. The Ten Commandments are not given in abstract. The basic and fundamental message of The Kingdom of God in history is the reality that God exists. God is active in our world. He is active in history. God is our creator. He is our sovereign, our king. God may be hidden. He is unseen. But that does not lessen our duty to know and serve him. We are called to love God. God is acting now. It is within the historical context of the past and present that God is working his purposes out.

We have seen how the Kingdom of God, on one hand, is the reality of the created order, the cosmos; and, on the other hand, the Kingdom of God is a reference to God's place in the heavenly realms, the unseen world. God is master of the universe,

the created order. And, God is master of the heavenly realm. What connects the created order and the heavenly realm? What is it that connects the seen world of creation and the unseen world of God's throne? The two are connected in the unfolding pages of human history. God is master of history as it unfolds. The Kingdom of God is *being* revealed in the unfolding story of human history.

And it is to that unfolding history that we need to turn at this time and take a deeper look.

The Kingdom of God in history – Mark 1:14 - 15

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

When sending a message to those in the realm of their authority, it was the habit and practice of the ancient Roman rulers, the Caesars, to preface their declarations as "good news." The idea was that *anything* the king said was *good news*. The mere fact that you had caught Caesar's attention was presumed to be *good news*, even if Caesar's message to you was the confiscation of your property and your banishment to a rocky uninhabited island off the Dalmatian coast. The message is from Caesar: smile and rejoice.

Mark wrote his gospel from the city of Rome. He knew the ways of the Roman Caesars. When he tells us that Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel – good news – of God, he intends this as a clear contrast to the presumption of the Roman Caesar. When the emperor sent a message to his realm, he claimed it to be good news. But what the emperor declared was not really so. In contrast, Christ has true good news. He has plenary authority to make it happen. His message is not just talk. His message is that the Kingdom of God is *at hand*. It is near. It is within grasp.

The centrality of Jesus' message of the Kingdom of God is revealed in the fact that this phrase is used ninety-nine times in the Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke. And, if you broaden it to include Kingdom of Heaven, there are over thirty more uses in Matthew's gospel. (Remember, Jews would often avoid speaking God's name. So, for Matthew, *Kingdom of Heaven* is synonymous with *Kingdom of God*.) The Kingdom of God is a big deal in Jesus' teaching.

The first thing we note regarding the substance of what Jesus taught regarding the Kingdom of God is that the Kingdom of God *is not* politics.

The Kingdom of God *is not* politics – Luke 17:20 - 21

²⁰ Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, ²¹ nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!'"

It is helpful to be aware that there is always the temptation to harness spiritual hopes to a political process. The **French Revolution** was to usher in the age of man. The **Bolsheviks** promised a worker's paradise. **Hitler** presided over the **Third Reich**. The **Ayatollah** was to make **Iran** a pure **Islamic** theocracy. **ISIS** wants to reestablish the Caliphate.

All political desire and effort must be limited and tempered in its reach. We will not find perfection in this life. Be wary of any government or leader who promises heaven on earth. Politics is what man does. Building the Kingdom is what God does. Beware of substituting political, earthly goals for Christ. There is a place for politics. Christians can be involved in politics, but they must do so remembering the inherent limitations. Resist seeking a political solution to what is a spiritual problem. The world of Caesar and the world of God overlap, but they are distinctive spheres.

Standing before Pilate, Jesus told him, and us, that his – Christ's kingdom – is spiritual. (John 19:36) "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world." The kingdoms of this world are ushered in by fighting, warfare, coup, intrigues, revolutions and insurrections. Christ's kingdom does not come in these ways.

The first thing we note is that the Kingdom of God is not politics. The second is that the Kingdom of God is where Christ is.

The Kingdom of God is where Christ is – Luke 17:21

for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you."

I enjoy talking about religion and the Bible, especially with people whose spiritual vantage point is different from my own. Over the years I have noticed that there is one Bible verse that many people think that they know, but in fact they misunderstand the meaning of the verse. These folk quote Luke 17:21, saying that Jesus taught "*The Kingdom of God is within you.*" What they mean is that Jesus is suggesting the path of a yogi mystic encouraging people to begin an inward search for spiritual enlightenment.

When interpreting the Bible, it is always helpful to have an accurate translation. The ESV gets Luke 17:21 right, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you. What Jesus is saying to his listeners (and to us) is that Kingdom of God is within their grasp. He is telling them that the Kingdom of God is near. His point is that the Kingdom of God is where Christ is. Jesus Christ is the Kingdom of God. This is why, in John 14, when Thomas says to Jesus "*We do not know the way,*" Jesus replies, "*I am the way, the truth and life.*" The message of the Kingdom of God is caught up in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Any religion that leads away from Jesus Christ is false religion. Any religion that leads to Jesus Christ is true religion. Christ himself is the treasure; he is the pearl of great price. The Kingdom of God is where Christ is.

The Kingdom of God is not politics. The Kingdom of God is where Christ is. Next, the Kingdom of God is where the church is at work.

The Kingdom of God is where the church is at work – Matthew 16:16 - 18

¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

It is not surprising that this is the next point in our exploration of the Kingdom of God. As we have just seen, the Kingdom of God is where Christ is. In this passage from Matthew’s gospel, Peter declares that Jesus of Nazareth is “*the Christ, the son of the living God.*” Jesus declares that upon this confession, upon this rock of truth, upon this reality, he – Jesus – will build his church. The declaration is that Jesus is the Messiah and it is upon that confession that the church is founded and expands.

Our first point declared what the kingdom is not: it is not politics. The second point emphasized the Christological nature of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom revolves around the person and work of Christ. The third point tells us how Christ’s work moves forward in history: through the life and ministry of the church. This is the ecclesiastical nature of the Kingdom of God. The story of the church is the story of the presence of the Kingdom of God in history.

What I have just written is controversial. The story of the church is not always a pretty history. Theologians have declared that there are three scandals in Christian teaching. The first is the scandal of the incarnation; the idea that God would take on human flesh and become man. The second scandal is the cross; the idea that God would permit the abuse and villainy of the crucifixion. The third scandal is the church; the idea that God would work through fallen men and women and a fallen institution. Yet he does. As long as the church is faithful in its declaration, in its adherence to the content of Peter’s confession, that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, the anointed one, the Son of God: then Christ is pleased to build his church and work through it to his purposes.

The Kingdom of God is not politics. The Kingdom of God revolves around the person and work of Christ. The Kingdom of God unfolds in history in the work and ministry of the church. Finally, the Kingdom of God is where the Holy Spirit changes lives.

The Kingdom of God is where the Holy Spirit changes lives

How the Holy Spirit worked in the Old Testament Era – Deuteronomy 6:4;

⁴ “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

Two Sundays ago we began our Sing Through the Centuries Sunday worship with the Hebrew Shema: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. This

declaration has been part of Jewish worship back to the time of Moses. In the new dispensation, for us as Christians, the most basic declaration of our faith is to affirm “Jesus Christ is Lord.” We say more than that. But everything we say flows from this affirmation. For the ancient Jews the Shema was their most fundamental declaration of faith. A pious Jew would recite this prayer each morning as he began his day. It was, in effect, the Jewish version of “Coram Deo” – living before the face of God. To declare in the morning “Hear O Israel, the Lord thy God is one” meant to take on the mantle of obligation and service of the requirements of God; to live under his authority and guidance. This simple affirmation was the first thing declared in worship and from it all the other distinctives of Jewish faith and practice flowed and unfolded. The world may worship idols. We serve the living God. The world may deny God, but we acknowledge him and seek to live under his guidance. Insofar as the Jewish people reflected the Kingdom of God, this reality began with this ringing declaration.

How the Holy Spirit brings the Kingdom of God - Mark 4:30 – 34

³⁰ And he said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? ³¹ It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, ³² yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

From the Old Testament Shema, we move on to several of the metaphors and images used by Jesus to illustrate the nature of the Kingdom of God. In this passage from Mark he uses the image of a mustard seed. It is small, almost invisible, yet grows to the largest of trees.

What is Jesus suggesting in this image? The kingdom is something that starts small and grows to great significance. The small seed brings a large tree. A single pearl is worth selling everything in order to possess it. A single grain of sand is part of an uncountable seashore. These are small things that produce great change.

The imagery here is intended to suggest the mystical understanding of the Kingdom of God. The story of Christ’s presence in a person’s life begins in a small way: a prayer of need; a conversion experience arising from a personal crisis; being presented as a child for baptism, or making a commitment to Christ at a youth retreat. These are small things in themselves, which can bring great change. The idea is that the Kingdom God takes root in a person’s life and begins to change them from the inside out. The Kingdom bears fruit. The person turns from sin to new life. **John Newton**, author of the hymn **Amazing Grace**, was a ship’s captain, a slave trader. The kingdom was implanted in his heart and his life turned and changed. He became a clergyman. And this leads to our last observation, how the Kingdom of God comes to individuals.

How the Kingdom of God comes to individuals - Luke 18:9 - 14

⁹ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰ “Two men went up into the temple to pray,

one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The last facet of understanding the Kingdom of God is hinted at in the story of John Newton, and illustrated in Jesus’ parable of the **Pharisee** and the **Publican**, or **Tax Collector**. Before I analyze Jesus’ story, I need to highlight for you how shocking the ending of the story would have sounded to Jesus’ first century hearers. Some movies have shocking endings: **Night of the Living Dead**; **Bridge over the River Kwai**; **The Sixth Sense**; or Kevin Costner’s “**No Way Out**.” What might be an equivalent emotional example from today’s world? Imagine, instead of a Pharisee, Jesus speaking of a pastor, or a bishop, or a ruling elder, or a deacon. And, instead of a tax-collector, imagine Jesus telling us that the one who buried his face, unable to stand before God, was a drug dealer, a prostitute, a transvestite, or a crooked politician. These might approximate the emotional shock Jesus’ first hearers would have felt hearing this story.

Jews pray with their hands lifted up. We tend to bow our heads and close our eyes, but that is not how Jews in Jesus’ day prayed. In this story we have two men coming into God’s presence. It is the story of two ways of relating to God. The Pharisee does not really look at God. He looks to himself. The Pharisee thinks that he does not need God because he thinks that he is doing everything rightly. The Pharisee makes himself righteous and, as a result, he has no true relation to God.

In marked contrast, the Tax Collector sees himself in God’s light. He truly does see himself for he looks to God. His eyes are open to see himself as he is. And, the result is that he knows he needs God. He knows that he lives by God’s goodness, and not by any goodness or righteousness in himself. He knows that he cannot presume upon God. He cannot force God to accept him. He cannot enter God’s presence based upon his own effort. He needs mercy. The Pharisee’s problem is that he thinks he is praising God when he is in fact praising himself. The publican knows his sin. He knows his debt. He knows his need. He knows his debt to grace. He knows he cannot boast.

Jesus ends the story telling his listeners, and speaking of the Tax Collector, I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. It is the Tax Collector who is justified, who is changed, and not the Pharisee. The Tax Collector experiences the transformation of the Kingdom of God. He has experienced God’s mercy; he becomes merciful. He becomes like God because the Kingdom of God has been planted in his heart. He draws life from God and passes it on. The decisions, actions, attitude and choices of his life change as he embodies the grace that he himself has received from God.

Review

The Kingdom God refers to three grand spheres of existence. It refers to the created world as we know it. It includes the unseen world of the heavenly realm. And it is unfolding in the pages of history as God's purposes are accomplished.

Within the pages of history, we are taught four things regarding the nature of God's Kingdom. The first is that it is not a political kingdom. The second is that the Kingdom of God is where Christ is. The third is that God's Kingdom is somehow tied up and revealed in the unfolding work of Christ's church. And finally, the Kingdom of God is made concrete and real in the lives of individuals as it takes root in the human heart and brings transformation through the power of the gospel message.

Say "Amen" Somebody.

Scripture Lesson - Deuteronomy 6:4-5

⁴ “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

Colossians 1:17

¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Psalms 93

The Lord reigns; he is robed in majesty;
the Lord is robed; he has put on strength as his belt.

Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved.

² Your throne is established from of old;
you are from everlasting.

Revelation 4

And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: ⁷ the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. ⁸ And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say,

“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come!”

⁹ And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰ the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

¹¹ “Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.”

Mark 1:14 – 15

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

Luke 17:20

²⁰ Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, “The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, ²¹ nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.”

Matthew 16:16

“But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I

will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”²⁰ Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

Mark 4:30

³⁰ And he said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? ³¹ It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, ³² yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

Luke 18:9-14

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

⁹ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰ “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”