

“Where Is The Kingdom?”

Matthew 3:1-12

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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Last week we looked at the Scripture passage about the wise men who came from the east to see the baby Jesus. As you'll recall, these were astrologers who were expecting a new king in Judea and so they were watching the stars for a sign that a king had been born. They saw the sign they were waiting for and traveled over a thousand miles to Jerusalem in order to worship this new king. When they arrive in Jerusalem, they ask the only question that Scripture records them asking, “where is the king?”

As we learned last time, Jesus is the real King. Not an earthly king who governs a particular area of land but the King of kings who is ruler of the whole world. Now, just as the wise men were concerned with the king, today we're concerned with His Kingdom. “In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’”

It would be a mistake to underestimate the importance of John the Baptist to the story of Jesus. We find a similar portrait of John in all four gospels. They are all clear, for example, that John is the one spoken of on Isaiah 40 that is to prepare the way for the Messiah, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’” Matthew and Mark also point out that “John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist.” This is the exact description of Elijah that we find in 2 Kings 1:8.

This is important because at the very end of the Old Testament, God spoke through the prophet Malachi saying, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet

before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.” This was the last words of prophecy for the next four hundred years. And so John comes along and picks up where Malachi left off, preparing the people for the arrival of the Messiah, the king.

James Montgomery Boice points out that John's message, according to Matthew, has three parts: a warning, a promise, and a demand. First, John warns that the kingdom of heaven is near. Jesus repeats this same message during his ministry. It's both good news and a warning.

It seems to me that we probably misunderstand this concept of the kingdom of God or kingdom of heaven. We tend to think of a kingdom as a specific place, such as the United Kingdom or the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. But that's not what is meant here in the gospels. A better way to understand this phrase would be “the kingship” or the reign or sovereignty of God. In other words, this is not so much as statement about something called “the kingdom” as it is a statement God is king. So to enter the kingdom of God means “to come under his rule, to accept him as king.” The kingdom of heaven is the place where God rules in the lives of his redeemed people.

This is why we have such a paradox. The kingdom of heaven is already in place. God is already sovereign over the entire universe. And yet, you don't have to look far to see that this world certainly doesn't look as if the all-powerful, all-loving God is in control. This is what theologians call the

“already and not yet” aspect of the kingdom of God. He is already the true king, and yet there is a long way to go in our world. He gives us the ability for now to resist his kingdom. This is why when we say the Lord’s Prayer we say, “thy kingdom come...on earth just as it is in heaven.” We are acknowledging His Kingdom and also praying that it would be expanded here on earth.

This brings us back to the idea that this is not just a blessing but also a warning. John is warning that at the coming of the kingdom God would reveal His wrath against the ungodly. For those of us who accept God’s reign over our lives, His coming is a blessing, but for those who reject His rule it will be a judgment. “He will gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

The second part of John’s message is a promise. John says, “he who is coming after me is mightier than I.” Just like the Old Testament prophets, John points away from himself and toward Christ. The promise is that the king himself is coming.

The third part of the message, according to Boice, is a demand: repent. There was a small country church that really needed to be repainted. The church put out the word that they were looking for a painter. Several came by and gave estimates but one of them was much more affordable than the rest. So they hired this painter and he got to work right away. Well, the reason that his price was so attractive was that he was watering down the paint to make it go farther. In no time he had the whole church painted. But just as he was finishing a thunderstorm popped up and washed all the paint right off the church. Suddenly he heard a voice from heaven booming: “repaint and thin no more.”

Whenever we hear the word repent, most of us probably think of being sorry for something we’ve done. And that can be part of it. But repentance goes much deeper than just feelings. In the New Testament, the word repent translates the Greek word *metanoia*, which literally means to change your mind. But in the Bible repent means more than just changing your mind. The Old Testament concept gets a little closer, translating the Hebrew word that means to turn or return. Joel 2:13 probably captures the idea best. It says, “Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.”

Repentance, then, means a radical transformation of the entire person. To repent means to completely change the direction of your life. It means turning away from sin and rebellion *and* turning toward God. Repentance means a change in your relationship with God and with other people. True repentance means wanting to restore the relationship with God and also with people that we’ve hurt. It means confessing our sins and accepting Christ’s forgiveness. Repentance means changing our heart, our mind, and our actions.

In verse 8 John says, “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.” Then he adds, “Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” He’s speaking to some of the Pharisees and Sadducees who came out to the river where John was baptizing and preaching. John is saying that being a member of a particular religious organization or having a particular ancestry is not enough to save you. There’s a saying that God has no grandchildren. That means that none of us is saved because of our parents’ or grandparents’ faith. Every person either repents and believes in Jesus or he perishes.

The bad news is that even after we repent and turn to Christ, each one of us will continue to sin. We will continue to disappoint Jesus and we will continue to hurt other people, even the people we love the most. The good news is that Jesus loves us so much that He is ready to receive and forgive each of us when we repent. In fact, the truth is that we are only able to repent because He has already forgiven us. We only repent because the kingdom of heaven has come near. It's only when we come to understand the greatness of our sin that we understand the greatness of God's grace. So in addition to repenting, turning to Christ for salvation, we are to live lives of *daily* repentance, bringing our sin to Christ every day for forgiveness, because as one commentator put it, "sin departs slowly."

Let me conclude by saying this: if you are sitting here today and have never submitted your life to Christ, if you have never come under his kingship, then why not make today the day. Confess your sins to Him and experience His love and forgiveness. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Then live a life of daily repentance, bearing fruit worthy of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen