

The Coming of the Kingdom of God
Luke 17:20-37, Isaiah 65:17-25

Brothers and sisters, I wonder - what comes to mind when you hear the term “the Kingdom of God?”

It probably has to do with looking forward to a time and/or a place where life is better than it is now... where there is plenty to go around for everyone, where life is not so hard, where peace has replaced war and terrorism... where there is no abuse, where wrongs are set right – where justice reigns and truth prevails.

And I believe that a time or a place like this would appeal to pretty much everyone. Even Atheists, who don’t believe in a God, can say amen to the description of what life will be like when the Kingdom of Heaven comes to earth.

As we heard is so beautifully described in Isaiah 65 “a new heavens and a new earth. *The sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. “ Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does*

not live out his years... No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat... They will not labor in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the Lord... The wolf and the lamb will feed together, the lion will eat straw, and dust will be the serpent’s food, they will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,” says the Lord.”

Such a beautiful and poetic description that gives some concrete references of what the Kingdom of God will be like, and in Luke’s gospel Jesus’s first reference to the Kingdom of God doesn’t come from using that actual term- but from describing some specific results of the Kingdom of God.

What do I mean? Well if we look at how Mark and Mathew record Jesus beginning his ministry they have Jesus coming out of the desert proclaiming “*Repent - the kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of God has come*” (Mark 1:15, Matt 4:17)

But in Luke's gospel, after Jesus comes out of the desert instead of saying "the Kingdom of Heaven is near" He quotes Isaiah 61:1-2 *"The Spirit of the Yahweh is upon me, because Yahweh has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor..."*

So in Luke's gospel, Jesus begins His ministry with a very concrete description of what the Kingdom of God is about and this gives us a better sense of what Jesus is referring to in the rest of Luke's gospel whenever He uses the term "the Kingdom of God."

Which happens quite a bit – 53 times to be specific, as compared to 15 times in Mark and only 5 times in Matthew, so what this shows us is that Luke is presenting Jesus as someone who knows a thing or two about the Kingdom of God – a bit of an expert on the subject.

Let me read a few examples for you.

Luke 6:20 - *"Looking at his disciples, he said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the **kingdom of God.**"*

Luke 8:10 – *"He said, "The knowledge of the secrets of the **kingdom of God** has been given to you."*

Luke 10:9 – *"Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The **kingdom of God** has come near to you.'"*

Luke 11:20 – *"But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the **kingdom of God** has come upon you."*

Now, to us it seems pretty obvious that Jesus is an expert on the Kingdom of God – but remember, at the time, Jesus was just one among many teachers who spoke about the Kingdom...

The Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law and the Religious leaders also considered themselves to be experts on the Kingdom of God and they were familiar with what the Prophets said about the Kingdom, how it would be established, and what signs would accompany it.

For example in Isaiah 13:9-10 The Day of Yahweh when the Kingdom comes is described as follows; *“See, the day of the Lord is coming —a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger— to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it. The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light.”*

And again in Isaiah 34:4 *“All the stars in the sky will be dissolved and the heavens rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine...”*

So the expectation was that the arrival of the Kingdom of God would be signaled by very noticeable cosmic signs in the heavens where the “sun and moon are darkened and stars are dissolving...” and be accompanied by divine judgement that would destroy the sinners.

Now to be fair, the Pharisees would not have disagreed with Jesus’ description of the Kingdom of God using Isaiah 61:1-2 where the captive are set free, good news proclaimed to the

poor and people experience God’s favor in healings and deliverance.

But from their understanding of the prophetic pictures the cosmic signs and divine judgement would come first and then afterwards God’s people would enjoy the benefits of how life was going to be in the Kingdom.

But if you noticed, when Jesus speaks about the Kingdom of God... it is in the present and accomplished tense; “yours is the Kingdom of God” and “the Kingdom of God has come upon you...” He starts His ministry as Mark and Matthew record by saying *“repent... The Kingdom of God is here!”*

And that is what the Pharisees and the Religious Leaders vehemently disagreed with Jesus about. Not only were the cosmic signs and the divine judgment upon the sinners – re: the Romans, gentiles and unrighteous Jews – not only had those signs not occurred... but the claim that the Kingdom had arrived was being made by some no-name, backwater hick

who honestly seemed to believe that the Kingdom had come because He somehow embodied the Kingdom.

In fact Jesus reiterates this truth to the Pharisees in the passage we read this morning. They had been “asking” when the Kingdom of God was coming – trying to dispute with Jesus that it hadn’t arrived because the required signs had not occurred, and Jesus answers back *“‘The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that comes through observation, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is in your midst.’”* (Luke 17:20-21)

Jesus is saying to them “I’m here... so the Kingdom of God is now here.”

Now 2000 years after the fact this makes total sense to us – of course Jesus embodies the Kingdom of God, duh?! But for the people of Jesus’ day to hear him say that He embodied the Kingdom in this way was outrageous – in the same way that we would consider it outrageous, crazy actually, that a small

town pastor from northern Alberta, with no seminary education, is claiming to have received a message from God with the exact date and time that Jesus will return and he expects us to believe him that this is the truth.

So you can understand why there was a dispute going on as to whether or not the Kingdom had come with the arrival of Jesus – because who was Jesus to claim he embodied the Kingdom and some pretty obvious signs had not yet occurred.

Now a couple weeks ago we noted how these prophetic pictures in the Old Testament are 2D collages of various themes that give us a recognizable image like a picture of the Messiah or the Kingdom of God (*show Perspective Art video to refresh again*)

But as they transition from prophecy into a 3D reality some of those themes that may have really stood out in 2D and seemed to dominate the picture – do not occur first or they are actually a very different kind of event in reality than they appear to be in the prophecy.

So while the themes of judgement and cosmic signs really stand out in the prophetic pictures of the Kingdom of God and the Day of the Lord - as God brings these prophecies into actual reality the truth is that cosmic signs and the destruction of sinners are not happening first because that not what actually establishes God's Kingdom in time and space.

That is why Jesus rebukes the Pharisees in his answer, saying to them *"the kingdom of God is not something that comes through observation..."*

In other words they are so caught up watching for specific signs that they are missing what those signs are supposed to point towards.

Being able to point out that a heavenly sign has occurred does not make anyone more obedient to God... or loving towards Him or towards others...

Rather what actually establishes God's Kingdom is the King whom God has chosen who can lead God's people back into

obedience and the right worship of God... and as we learned a few Sundays back – Jesus title as "the Son of God" is about Him being God's chosen King over Israel - to whom God has promised to give all the nations of this world for His Kingdom (Ps 2:7-8)

So it is King Jesus who will bring about the Kingdom - where God's will is done on earth as it is done in Heaven by all nation - and so wherever Jesus is present and working His ministry by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Kingdom of God has come and is being established.

But what makes this difficult to accept – both for the Pharisees and also for Jesus' disciples – and for us... is that the larger reality of what the Kingdom of God entails – what we heard described in Isaiah 65 for example - is not what we see evidenced in the world around us yet.

The Pharisees looked at Jerusalem and said *"as long as there is a Roman governor in Jerusalem how can we say in truth that the Kingdom of God has come!?"*

The disciples looked at Jesus and thought *“what kind of King does not gather an army or position himself and his followers to take political power and become established?”*

And we look at the world around us and say *“If the King has come and the Kingdom of God has been established why is there so much suffering, sickness, and brokenness? Why is there injustice and corruption? Why do natural disasters come and destroy people’s lives? And why do the people of the King suffer and go through hardship?”*

And Jesus acknowledges this discrepancy to His disciples – He turns to them and says *“The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it.”*

Jesus is fully aware that when He says the Kingdom of God has come and is among you... that it has not come in its fullness... there are healings, there is deliverance, there are miracles but these are the signs that point towards what is yet to come in fullness.

The Kingdom it is not yet complete – because as Jesus e says *“the Son of Man in his day will be (future tense) like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other. But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.”*

So, right now the Kingdom is being established but it is not yet complete – but there will come a day – and here Jesus rather audaciously changes the term ‘The Day of LORD’ into the ‘Day of the Son of Man’ – there will come a Day when Jesus will reveal His full glory and the glory of His Kingdom and what we see in the world around us will fully reflect what is described and promised, in passages like Isaiah 65:17-25.

And when the Kingdom comes in fullness, then it will include the cosmic heavenly signs that are so obvious for all to see – that’s why Jesus refers to lightning, which lights up the whole sky.

But the first point we need to take from this brothers and sisters is not to miss out on experiencing what Jesus has

brought in the Kingdom of God because we are looking for its fullness – it is here and it is real, even if it is not in its fullness yet.

The second point we need to take is that we mustn't doubt that it will come in its fullness just because we only experience a foretaste of it right now. The Day of the Son of Man will come.

But how do we know that Jesus isn't just talking big and making promises that he can't deliver on when he is speaking about the Kingdom coming in its fullness?

Well one reason is that Jesus uses the term "the Son of Man" when He speaks about the day on which He will fully establish the Kingdom of God, and this is a reference to a specific vision given to the prophet Daniel when Israel was in exile in Babylon.

Daniel 7:13-14 reads *"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds*

of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."

This is also an amazing picture of what the Kingdom of God will be like - and Jesus makes bold move in calling himself the Son of Man to connect himself to it.

And what it says to us is that although Jesus looks like any other ordinary human being, and there is really nothing to prove that He embodies the Kingdom of God, He is, in fact, the one whom this vision reveals as being chosen by God who will be given the authority, glory and power required in order to set up an everlasting Kingdom where the Romans are not in Jerusalem, where his followers are exalted, and where justice reigns and truth prevails and there is a new heavens and a new earth.

The other reason we can trust that Jesus will be able to deliver on these promises is because when He describes the day of the Son of Man He says that it is He Himself who will be like lightning.

Now Jesus describes himself this way to point out to the disciples how they will be able to distinguish Him from any impostors who claim to bring in the Kingdom “over here or over there” instead when the Kingdom of God comes in its fullness it will be widely seen and easily noticed – like the lightning that lights up the whole sky.

But the reason for that is quite literally because it is Jesus who will be like the lightning – meaning His glory is going to shine so brightly no one will be able to miss Him.

Let me read to you from Luke 9:27-29 where Jesus says *“Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.” About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. As he was praying, the*

appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning.”

So when Jesus says *“The Son of Man in his day will be like the lightning”* Peter, James, and John know what He talking about, they know He’s not just talking big – they’ve actually seen a foretaste of what this looks like in Jesus and they know it to be true.

They have seen a glimpse of the coming Kingdom of God as Jesus’ future glory was revealed to them.

And when it comes to pass that they long to see one of the Days of the Son of Man – when the tension between what ought to be, since the Kingdom has Come - and what still is, since the Kingdom is not complete – when that tension becomes too much...

It is this preview of the Kingdom, the glory of Jesus Christ shining like lightning that will restore their strength and give them the endurance and Hope (as a noun) to keep waiting –

and praying Your Kingdom Come your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.

They have seen what is coming – and so they can say with the Apostle Paul in Romans 8:18 *“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”*

When Christ comes in His glory – not only does the Kingdom become complete, we shall be made like Him as well.

So brothers and sisters, if you come away with just one thing about Jesus this morning let it be that glimpse of His Kingdom glory. May it be indelibly seared into your vision so that you never forget what is yet to come, that is becomes your Hope when the current reality of what still is seems to contradict that the Kingdom of God is among us.

In those dark times brothers and sisters, may the Holy Spirit show you the glory of Jesus Christ shining like lightning – May it be for you a light in dark places... when all other lights go out.

For the Kingdom of God does not come by your observation – It has come, it is here and it will come by the revelation of the Son of Man – Jesus Christ – the King.

Amen.