

The Kingdom of Heaven Is at Hand

Isaiah 40:1-11, Matthew 3:1-12

“In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’” And he says the same thing to us today. John the Baptist was a country preacher if there ever was one. He wore those country clothes of camel’s hair with a leather belt. He ate that country food of locusts and wild honey. He talked that country talk about snakes and cutting firewood and gathering wheat and burning chaff. And when he preached in the wilderness of Judea, everybody listened. The city folk from Jerusalem came out to hear him, and all the people from the surrounding area came out to hear him, and all the country folk down by the river Jordan came out to hear him, so by then he had a powerful large congregation. Do we dare to number ourselves among them?

Almost all who came to listen to John must have heard what he had to say, because most of them confessed their sins and let him baptize them, a very strange thing for the people of Israel to do. They usually reserved baptism for Gentile outsiders who were converting into the faith of Israel and needed the cleansing. But John convinced them that they were all just as bad as the outsiders, that they were all standing in the need of prayer, that they all needed to be converted to the truth, and that they all needed new faith in God, so that is what they did, at least most of them: they confessed their sins, they let John baptize them, they entered the new covenant, and thus they became citizens of the kingdom of God. Is this something we need to do?

Now how in the world did John pull this off? He had a very simple message. There were only two things he announced, and those were two ways of saying the same thing. Then there was one consequence of them both. John preached that the kingdom of heaven was at hand and that he who was mightier than John was coming after him. These two are the same. John was preparing the way for the mightier Jesus Christ, and in Jesus Christ God has come to us and has begun the establishment of his kingdom on earth. The only appropriate response to this good news was to repent, to confess one’s sins, to be baptized, and so to enter into the joy of the kingdom. Are we ready to do that today?

The message of John the Baptist contains the good news of a wonderful gift to us: “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.” When we hear the word “heaven,” we may think of a place far away to which we hope to travel after death. But that is not what John is talking about. He is talking about the arrival of God to reign over this

world, a reign of justice and peace, a reign of majesty and righteousness, a time of forgiveness and renewal. The kingdom of God displaces all the other kingdoms and all the other powers ruling over our lives. Would this be of interest to you?

Consider the powers and forces that control our lives, and rejoice that the coming of the kingdom spells the end for them. Humanity is both united and divided by the political powers of many nations. Such powers may be necessary, but they are temporary. We yield them due allegiance, but not undue honor and glory. Another power over us is the huge economic system of which we are each such a small part, producing and consuming. It shall not always be so. Think about the ways in which the power of anger and resentment warp and twist our lives. How terrible it is to live in their kingdom! Consider also the power of evil in our lives: hatred, lust, covetousness, jealousy, betrayal, pride, fear, guilt, failure, rebellion—the list goes on, and each part of it warps and twists and hurts us until we are unrecognizable. Rejoice that the kingdom of God is coming, in which those false powers are broken, so that they can no longer lord it over us and claim our allegiance. This is what it means that God forgives us. We cannot get ourselves out of the messes we are in. But God includes us in his kingdom anyway. The kingdom has begun. Already we can be set free from sin. Already we can be set free from guilt. Already we can begin experiencing the renewed relationship with God and therefore renewed relationships with each other. Already we can meet death with the confidence that it has been defeated and that it has no lasting claim upon us.

John also points us to Jesus Christ. It seems that John would have pointed to himself. He had all those people out there listening to him. Things were happening. But John had the grace to realize that he was just the messenger, not the message. He pointed away from himself and so to Jesus Christ alone, the one sent not only by God but from God, he who was mightier than John. The sticking point of the human condition has been the brokenness of our relationship with God. Here is the answer. God himself has come to us in Jesus Christ. Whatever else you think and do and say and accomplish, no matter wherever you go or do not go, do not miss this: God has come to us in Jesus Christ. Whatever else happens to you in this life, whatever happens to your loved ones for good or bad, do not neglect this: God has come to us in Jesus Christ. Everything John had to say about the kingdom was a way of saying this, because the arrival of God in Jesus Christ initiates the kingdom. The coming of Jesus Christ is the coming of the kingdom.

What shall we do? How shall we respond to this gift? John says for us to “repent.” Because the kingdom is at hand, repent. Because Jesus Christ has come to us, repent, turn around, do an about face, head in a new direction. Repentance is not a way of earning God’s favor, because we would not even know what direction to turn. Repentance is not a way of making God love us, because that would assume

that there was a time when God did not love us. Repentance does not bring the kingdom near or call Jesus to our sides; repentance is made possible because the kingdom has already come near and Jesus is already at our sides. Instead, to repent is to respond to the always prior love and grace of God. We are commanded to do it, but the fulfillment of the command is based on the prior gift of the coming of the kingdom and of God's Christ. So, to repent is to receive the kingdom and God's Christ in faith, to turn from the old to the new, to turn from death to life, to be set free from the power of sin, death, and evil, and to be given faith, hope, love, and joy. We are commanded to repent, not because we have any capability for it within ourselves, but because the nearness of the kingdom and of God's Christ make it not only possible but imperative.

Hence the question: What are we to do? Do we attempt to stand before God on the basis of who we are and what we do, or do we stand before God only on the basis of repentance and acceptance of God's gift? Do we stand before God with an inflated sense of our own goodness and self-importance, or do we acknowledge the overwhelming goodness and importance of the one more powerful than we, the one whose sandals we are not worthy to carry? Do we even deceive ourselves by standing before God with a mock confession: "Yes, Lord, I am a miserable sinner, but I thank you that I am not quite as miserable as that other sinner over there!"? The drive to carve out for ourselves our own place to stand before God is powerful but regrettable. John saves his harshest words for those who make that choice. To attempt to claim our own place is to refuse and to decline the gifts of God. The gifts are extended to us, and the only way to receive and appropriate them is through repentance and faith, turning toward God and trusting God's grace.

The grace of God has two aspects: grace as power over our lives and grace as power within our lives. Grace as power over our lives is the powerful grace of forgiveness, of not counting our sins against us, of welcoming us into the new covenant and the new kingdom. Grace as power within our lives is the grace of renewal, of the abandonment of old ways and habits and patterns, of the growth of new life and new maturity in citizenship in the kingdom. It is not only the case that God does not count our sins against us. It is also the case that God works to eradicate sin from our lives. God's grace is the medicine we need for the fallen human condition. The grace of God calls forth our praise and thanksgiving.

The grace of God also calls forth graciousness. God has loved us so that we might love God and love each other. God has forgiven us so that we might be restored to God and forgive each other. The coming of Christ and of the kingdom of God is not a matter of the establishment of individual and independent relationships with God. It has to do instead with the creation of the new human community.

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Grace brings renewal to our lives, and our graciousness toward each other is one of the most obvious consequences of that.

Augustine, a pastor in north Africa around A.D. 400, once prayed to God: Give what you command, and command what you will. It may seem a strange prayer, but it recognizes that God simultaneously expects more of us than we can do and also gives to us what he expects. This is what is happening here. We are called upon to repent, and it seems impossible-- if we were strong enough or good enough to repent, we would not need to! But at the same time, we are given what is needed and what is commanded: God himself draws near to us in Jesus Christ, and so the kingdom is begun. It is only this drawing near that makes repentance possible. The kingdom began long ago. It continues to grow. Its victory is certain.

God Almighty, speaking through his messenger John, announces his Christ and his kingdom and calls upon us today to repent. What will it be?

To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

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