

Unreasonable Hope

Series: *Kingdom Come*; Revelation 7: 9-17

They met in caves where dead bodies were buried. They worshiped in the dark and used secret signs to recognize each other in public. They lived in constant fear of being discovered, arrested, and sentenced to die for the public amusement of a Roman audience. If caught, they faced being torn apart by wild animals, beaten, burned, or crucified all for the crime of being followers of Jesus the Christ – for being Christian.

The dangers they faced were real. The lucky ones only lost their homes and all their possessions. It was a very frightening time. Under Nero, Christians were blamed for the fire that destroyed much of Rome. Thousands were tortured and killed.

What do you say to people like this? What do you say to people who were hurting so badly and needing so desperately to hope and to endure? What do you say?

Using the language of Jewish apocalyptic literature – dramatic and theatrical imagery of the cosmic struggle between good and evil – the author of the New Testament book of Revelation sends a message of hope to people living in dark caves and in tribulation near the end of the first century. The message declares that, in God’s kingdom, there is no more hunger, no more thirst, and no more suffering from the oppressive heat of slavery or the terror of the stake. It is an image of all people – all nations – surrounding the throne of God. It is a vision of all being singing praises and participating in endless celebration. Jesus himself will be with them and care for them. “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

So, what do you think of when I mention the book of Revelation? Many people tend to think of the *Left Behind* book series. It conjures images of the end of the world and perhaps the second coming of Jesus. I think of how popular the *Left Behind* series is even though it is fiction based on a thoroughly discredited theology.

What do you think of when I mention the phrase “Kingdom come?” Is it the end of the world or life after death? Is it reconciliation an redemption – perhaps peace? For some, it is the image of where one is blown to!

I think of the words from the Lord’s prayer in Matthew’s Gospel, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” The petition *your kingdom come* does not mean “get us out of here as soon as possible and on to our final reward without all those other people around”. It means *God’s kingdom* as an alternative to existing kingdoms of the day – particularly Caesar’s kingdom, Rome.

What words might describe this image of *God’s kingdom* today? We could call it God’s philosophy or sphere of influence. It is a particular life perspective and the image of how we choose to understand the true nature underlying the universe. God’s kingdom comes when God’s will is done. This means that God’s fervent yearning for us becomes the way we live. This includes: embracing justice, doing peace, and crossing all barriers of race, socio economics, politics, nationality, religion, gender, and philosophy. It’s like “the world living as one.” Imagine it happening now!

If Jesus meant anything that is of real value for us today, it is in the revealed truth that somehow in the workings of eternal reality, ultimate power called God, there is empathy and compassion for the plight of people. In this lies a deep meaning for our lives. It prompts our faith perspective that the nature of the divine dynamic is with us and is in the direction of the poor, oppressed, and powerless. The nature of the reality behind the universe is love and freedom. Somehow, the eternal dimension of life is moving into our experience with newness

and there is hope!

This sermon series began on Easter Sunday and is titled *Kingdom Come*. It is a series based on looking at life from the perspective of resurrection – through the lens of resurrection. God’s new thing has begun in Jesus. This new thing is very much present in the world today even if it is hard to see. It is often obscured by the noise and glitz of modern life and by all our stuff. It can be obscured as well by the opaque canopy of organized religion even with the best of intentions.

The next several weeks, the sermons in this series will be based on readings from the book of *Revelation*. Apocalyptic literature like *Revelation* was written for people in tremendous distress, people in hopeless despair, and for those causing distress and those oppressing others. It was written to awaken them from their denial or to comfort them in their despair.

Revelation represents a vision of God’s new creation, the presence of an alternative kingdom – an alternative reality -- another way! Such words are written to us as well as we are facing the reality of evil in our world. We face that reality armed only with community, faith in the meaning by which we choose to view the world and our lives, and with a text – the Bible.

What about that text? Our text is the biblical Word to people living in hopelessness and with living with injustice. There are lots of such words in the Bible. As of this writing, I have just returned from a conference with Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann. There are two things from Brueggemann I’d like to share with you today concerning our text.

1. Our text, the Bible, is not a historical narrative, so arguments about literal or figurative interpretations are really senseless. The biblical text “stands at some distance” from the original events. It’s words are a “stylized artistic act of imagination.” (from Brueggemann’s book *Inscribing the Text*). We have the task of entering into dialogue with this text to find meaning – ultimately we seek meaning for our lives.

2. The fundamental movement of the Bible is from the kingdoms of this world (Pharaoh’s Egypt and Caesar’s Rome) to the kingdom of God. In the biblical text, we can find a “sub-version” of life when we enter into dialogue with the inner life of the biblical text. The Old Testament prophets and their New Testament successor Jesus try to wake us up to the realization of how much we are tied to kingdom of this world – how much we are caught up in race for acquiring stuff. At the same time, this kingdom is squashing real initiative and creativity, pressing us to conformity.

The text speaks to us today to wake us up to how much this world is not working and how much our hearts and minds are tied to it -- out of synch with God’s truth. The text speaks to challenge us in our comfort. It speaks to help us see how destructive the kingdoms of this world are. How many people are on the margins? What a widening gap there is between the privileged and the struggling! How little hope is present for the future and any real change!

The text calls us to be compassionate – to look and see what’s going on. The text also declares the hope that comes only when we open our eyes to see the loss, to empathize with the suffering, and to embrace the grief of those left behind. It call us to share the grief of the poor and confess the poverty within us. Hope is revealed precisely then.

Hope is not the same thing as positive thinking. Hope is trust that the movement of God is in the direction of healing, wholeness, justice, peace, Shalom, and abundance -- plenty for all. The biblical image is that God is doing a new thing.

We live in a world that is highly skeptical, maybe even cynical, or very condescending, perhaps even hostile, regarding the reality of God’s new creation. Revelation is the vision of harsh reality and ultimate hope. It is the i□□□□□angels and martyrs singing praise around the throne and to the Lamb of God. “You are high and exalted and worthy of praise.”

*Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto God and to the Lamb!
And those robed in white are receiving honor, the ones who have come
through great tribulation worship God day and night.
[God] will shelter them.
They will hunger no more and thirst no more
The Lamb will be their shepherd and guide them to the water of life.
God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*

God offers hope precisely when all seems hopeless. God offers divine presence and the vision of an alternative reality we just couldn't see before. What seems hopeless to you? What seems hopeless in your life, in your family, in your world?

What can you hope for? Is there a vision of new creation you can imagine? What might the coming of God's kingdom look like in your life? What will it mean for you to embrace it with your whole being? What will it mean for your to work for it with great passion? This is what we are called to do.

We live between realms. We are citizens of this world. As such, we are at the mercy of political and economic powers. We are at the mercy of cultures and voices telling us to watch out and be careful. They say there is not enough, so get all you can and don't share. Watch out for number one.

But with the □□□□□ of another kingdom, there is another way, another perspective. It is starkly different in its values and priorities. This kingdom takes the side of the poor and oppressed. It values the marginalized. This is a vision of abundance through sharing. It is a vision of trust in the provisions of God. This vision rejects the mindset of scarcity and fear. This is the kingdom of unreasonable hope, of people willing to orient their lives around the kingdom coming – the kingdom already come

Crossroads Church stands here in this place, at this time, and in this culture to proclaim this vision. You and I stand here because we choose to live with abundance, hope, generosity, honesty, and radical commitment to an alternative vision of life. Our mission is to live with unreasonable hope that the Kingdom of God has come through Jesus and comes today precisely where hope seems least reasonable. We are choosing to live in the unreasonable hope that God's Kingdom is the real stuff of life.