

# Kingdom Come

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

The title *Kingdom Come* is intended to refer to the language of the Lord's Prayer with the phrase, "thy kingdom come." It is a prayer, almost a demand, that God's values and God's life will become intimately part of our own! It also includes the expectation of Jesus coming back—the second coming which is the theme of this reading from 1 Thessalonians.

There are lots of challenges when it comes to reading and interpreting the Bible for our day and time. First of all, this idea of kingdom is really problematic for many of us. I don't know about many kingdoms myself. They're not the norm in our world as they were during the whole span of time in which Bible was written. At the same time, it's hard to find a really good substitute image for the Kingdom of God: an image that is big and majestic enough to do God justice and also tangible enough to give us the sense of actually living in it here and now.

Perhaps even more problematic than kingdom language for many of us today is this idea of the second coming of Jesus, the speculation of a physical return by Jesus as King of earth. This has been written about in scholarly journals as well as in popular novels. For many Christians today, belief in the second coming—things like the rapture, an Antichrist, etc.—are central to their faith. For many other Christians, we tend to be skeptical or try not to think about it that much.

It's clear that the early church expected Jesus to return soon as a triumphant Messiah to set up God's kingdom on earth. 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians was probably the earliest document we have in the New Testament. It was written by the Apostle Paul and filled with expectations that the world would end soon with Jesus returning, the resurrection of the dead, and a final judgment with believers going to heaven and non-believers not. Later New Testament writings were not so clear in their expectation of a second coming. They seemed to have settled in for the long haul of being the church in the world.

Paul and his readers in Thessalonica were ready for the kingdom to come soon. Jesus, however, seems to have had a different understanding of this *kingdom* idea. Now, some 2000 years later, either he never came back or we missed it or the second coming was more spiritual in nature, with Jesus coming into our hearts and minds. The big question I see for today in second coming theology is this: can we actually embrace this "coming Kingdom" in a way that has integrity for our belief, direction for our living, and a grounded hope for our lives?

The whole idea of a Messiah figure was never a part of Jewish history or belief until their whole country and culture were exiled in Babylon. Messiah had always just meant *anointed one* so that any king would be a Messiah. Gradually, the Messiah tradition came to be associated with King David—the ideal king of the Jews. But it was while they were in Babylonian captivity, then after Babylon was conquered by Persia, that Jewish messianic expectation got wedded to Persian cosmic dualism. By Jesus' time, many Jews expected there would be a great cosmic battle between the forces of good and those of evil at the end of time. The Jewish Messiah would head the forces of good. It was all pretty violent and that is the great irony in this whole second coming expectation.

When the Jewish people wrote their story of creation (Genesis 1:1-2:4a), it was actually during, or right after, their exile in Babylon. In that story, they drew a sharp distinction with other cultures and religions by stating firmly that creation was the loving work of a benevolent God. It was not born in violence and destruction, but of the creative Word of God who pronounced all things good. Matthew Fox was right when he insisted that *Original Blessing* is our heritage rather than original sin.

As a result of all this, two voices from the tradition of Judaism reverberate through the tradition of Christianity and speak to us today. One is the voice proclaiming the truth of

redemptive violence—that ultimately good can come from destroying what is evil, from wiping out the opposition. Most of the *second coming* belief embraces this idea of redemptive violence. It pictures God as judgmental and as the ultimate avenger.

This voice is deep in our hearts as Americans. We were born as a nation in the fires of armed conflict. We admire the stories of brave revolutionaries who stood up to the powerful army of Great Britain and won independence. We take pride as a nation that, once we finally got into World War II, we defeated the armies of Hitler and fascism.

Now, you may remember that I love to watch westerns, especially when time permits on Saturday mornings. The story is always the same: good vs. evil. Evil seem to be winning until the good guy on the white horse rides into town and beats the bad guy in a gun fight. And the bad guy always draws first! Everyone is saved and the hero usually rides out of town to practice his form of justice and redemption somewhere else. It's the same story with super-heroes. The plot is designed to defeat the villain without ever changing the underlying system. "Superman [or Batman] intervenes in the lives of people [while] never challenging them to evaluate their beliefs and values or exposing themselves the anguish of transformation." (Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 19)

This story is deep in the psyche of most Americans and, sadly, has too often found expression in our efforts to fight just wars abroad and identify enemies at home to blame: be they liberals, fundamentalists, blacks, whites, Hispanics, Asians; gays, lesbians, bi-sexual, or transgender persons, or even television preachers. But this is not the tradition we have from Jesus. He reflected for us the second voice of his tradition--now the second voice of our tradition. He resisted the temptation to become a war-like Messiah. He resisted the temptation to identify with one of the sects of Judaism in his day and vilify the others. Jesus always sought a third way—not fight nor flight, not seeking a scapegoat and not appeasing the powerful or the masses. Jesus embraced the outcast, spoke truth in love, and chose an intimacy of relationship with others that risked being honest. The call of Christ for us is to follow Jesus in that way: to be makers of peace by trusting that all of creation, including us, is very good.

How does this affect us? That's a good question. I suspect most of us at Crossroads Church tend to be in opposition to war. I believe that war is inconsistent with the life and teaching of Jesus; that "when the armed forces are sent to war, it is a sign that we as a nation have failed to find another way; and that Jesus calls us to find that other way." (Jack Price, *Finding Faith*, 63).

These two voices: redemptive violence on one hand and our call to be peacemakers on the other, live deep within each of us. The challenges they present include much more than whether or not our nation sends armies to war. The choice is whether we believe in the myth of redemptive violence or believe in Jesus' way of peacemaking. There was a study a few years ago that revealed how most TV evangelists who preach God's wrath and vengeance grew up in abusive family situations. In some ways, their experience of punitive judgment has carried over to their theology

Some of you have experienced living in a household that was abusive perhaps physically, certainly emotionally, maybe even sexually abusive. Those experiences make it difficult to trust images of God as paternal, as all-powerful and kindly, and often as judgmental. Yet, it is easy to find ourselves treating our own children or spouses in similar ways. In my experience, the one I tend to abuse most of all is me myself. For much of my life I have judged and found myself lacking: trying first to measure up to those high expectations and now to let go of the need to judge, to love myself as I am.

It's a great gift to love and accept yourself. My experience is that we cannot receive that gift in isolation from others. We were made for relationship and it is the challenging and intimate relationships of our lives that offer the richest opportunities for growth, peace, and rebirth—like our families and our church family. Fr. Richard Rohr has written,

Emotions are not right or wrong, good or bad. They are merely indicators of what is happening, and must be listened to, usually in the body. *People who do not feel deeply finally do not know or love deeply either.* It is the price we pay for loving. Like Job we must be willing to feel our emotions and come to grips with the mystery in our head, our heart, and our body. (need salutation)

Like individuals and nations, many churches were birthed in violence. Even Crossroads Church came into existence through a process that could be called emotionally violent. There was an experience of betrayal by a trusted leader and of losing a beloved building and sense of identity. Even though much of the core community left together, there was a scar. Much of the energy of Crossroads formation, including the very creative governance structure and the powerful congregationally-led vision, were shaped with an energy that sought security from abusive authority. Throughout almost thirteen years of life, this congregation has consistently sought to listen to the voices of her better angels, to be makers of peace, and trust-ers in the community we always work to shape together within God.

Now, we face another time of transition. I am preparing for a new adventure in life and ministry in a new place. The last time this happened for me, I left a church in pain after many years of service, and came to Kansas City. My experience here has been life-giving and transformational. You are preparing to say “good-bye” to a senior pastor. The last time this happened, you left in pain and formed Crossroads Church. And this congregation has become a sanctuary of healing and new life both within these walls and in the broader community.

Both voices still echo in our soul: pain and violence on the one hand and transformed living on the other. The Christ Spirit calls to us to hear the way of our oneness, to trust that there is no need to fear, to trust that God celebrates the life of this congregation and calls us to trust in the grace of God’s love for us and through us. God invites us to embrace life in its fullness and abundance by trusting in the relationships of our lives, by trusting that we are God’s own image and absolutely essential to each other like cells of a single body, and by trusting that our differences when shared in love actually make us stronger. I see this as the truth of the great commandments Jesus taught: to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. And at the core of both is the need to love ourselves as God loves us.

Okay, Jack, so how do we do that? How do we cooperative with God’s kingdom coming today? It isn’t easy, but the best place to start is where you are. Do you have a partner, a family? As a parent or as a child, or as the adult child of an aging parent, start with that! Practice accepting and loving yourself as you are because that will be the foundation of your love for God and others. That is how God made us.

Church is a great laboratory to practice loving yourself and others. We are each here because we choose to be. We are at Crossroads because we feel drawn to a community that seeks to build and deepen relationships, to learn to trust and love. We are here to practice not turning away or lashing out when afraid, but turning toward and leaning in to each other, and leaning on each other.

It’s really that simple and that hard. Let’s start where we are, but not stop there because our love for ourselves and for each other must eventually become love for the stranger, love for the enemy, and love for God who is revealed in stranger and enemy. But now I’m getting into the message for next week! For now, let the Kingdom reign in your heart. Let the very life of God that is already within you, flow throughout every aspect of your life and the world you touch. By reaching across the abyss of what frightens or angers us, by reaching across the space of mistrust to touch the very real person on the other side, we will find God. We will find Jesus. We will find ourselves. And God’s Kingdom will come. We will discover that it is already here.