

Thy Kingdom Come, O Lord (part 1)

In our “Searchers” class, our adult Christian education group that meets before worship, the comment was made this morning, “We don’t really hear preachers talking about scriptures that have to do with war and violence and bloodshed and death.” Little did that person know that’s exactly what Jesus is giving us in the scripture today. It’s not the beatitudes. It’s not the Sermon on the Mount. It’s not the feeding of the 5,000 or turning water into wine or the healing of ten lepers, the hemorrhaging woman, or Jairus’ daughter, or giving sight to a blind beggar. And it’s certainly not the raising of Lazarus.

No, what we get today is a terrifying vision of the future. What we get today is the center of Jewish culture being utterly destroyed, wars and rumors of wars, betrayal from friend and family, persecution, arrest, and potential death. It doesn’t seem to be a hopeful message.

It’s one of those days – and I’m seeming to have a lot of these days the more I preach – when I look at the gospel and go, “Wait, what?” Then I read what is written in the Old Testament and ask, “Huh?... When did you two reverse? When did the Gospel become violent and the Old Testament become a vision of peace?”

We’re used to looking into the Old Testament and seeing the stories of war and conquest and Israel going into the Promised Land and ransacked and slaughtering so many people who were evil in the sight of God. We’ve got stories in the Old Testament of Moses telling the people to go through the camp and kill with the sword brother, friend, and neighbor so as to purge the wickedness of sin from the people, all in order to remain God’s holy people. There are stories of the prophet Elijah who slaughtered 400 priests of Baal after winning a contest of gods. King Saul pursued David through all the land, threatening to murder him, because Saul had gone crazy. It’s Israel’s ancient version of “Game of Throws” before HBO got hold of the story.

On the other side of that coin, we’re use to the Gospel being Jesus teaching the people how to love. Jesus teaching them how to be the people of God. Jesus teaching the people holy living that was not dependent on law so much as it was dependent on compassionate holy relationship.

Today, though, we have Isaiah, a major prophet of the Old Testament, speaking about Utopia... or what I’m going to refer to as Utopia. Isaiah is speaking about this vision of a holy place where if someone dies at a hundred years old, they were considered as having died young. Isaiah speaks of building homes and being able to live in those homes themselves; a reference to a time when there is no more exile. Isaiah speaks of a future with no war or sickness or untimely death. It’s a reality where predators lay down with prey in peace, children don’t even have to fear the poisonous asp.

What is this perfect place? What is this Utopia Isaiah is speaking about? How do we get there? Well, let’s turn to Jesus and see if Jesus has the answer. If an Old Testament prophet is telling us of Utopia maybe there’s a New Testament teaching that tells how to get there.

Instead, we get Jesus saying the Temple will be destroyed. There will be war. Some of you will be put on trial. Some of you will be put to death.

“Wait, what? That’s not what I signed on for? Jesus, what are you telling us?”

Again, how do we get beyond what we hear from Jesus this morning so we can find Isaiah’s Utopia? How do we do it? How do we work with Jesus’ eschatology – end times theology – to reach Isaiah’s much more desirable vision? There’s got to be a way.

Let’s take a look at this Luke passage a little bit deeper. When we open up our Bibles to this passage in Luke 21, the disciples are looking at the Temple in Jerusalem in awe and amazement. They’re going on about how creative and crafty the artisans of Israel are because of the beauty of the Temple. They are in awe of something created with human hands out of a human need to have some visual representation of God being among the people.

In response, Jesus is telling the disciples the Temple they are in awe of is going to be destroyed. The place where it is believed God lives among the people in the inner most chamber of the Temple, in the Holy of Holies, is gonna be torn down and not one stone will remain atop another. In a way, Jesus is telling them not to focus on what was made by human hands to meet a human need, but rather focus on God.

And Jesus has a point. The Temple is not something God asked for. The only reason the Temple existed, if we go back in the Old Testament and read in 1 Kings, is King David had an ambition to build God a house of wood and stone. God was content to have the home of God’s divine presence be the Tabernacle. It was a much more fitting place of residence for God because the Tabernacle was a tent structure; it was portable. The Tabernacle traveled with God’s people as they wandered through the desert for 40 years. It was a meaningful sign that God *moves with* God’s people. God can be anywhere God’s people are. A huge Temple is not gonna move so easily no matter how much craftiness the artisans of Israel put into it.

Jesus in this moment is telling the disciples to put their faith in what cannot be destroyed. He wants them to turn their understanding of God from something solid/stationary/created, toward God’s holy self. Jesus is encouraging them, in the face of this terrifying future to keep hold of faith and to stand firm in that faith. Jesus is preaching persistence and perseverance in following the New Covenant ways he is teaching the disciples.

What Jesus is saying in this moment very much reminds me of a number of Old Testament prophets warning of disaster and destruction. The passage that comes to mind first is from the second chapter of the book of the prophet Joel. This is often the passage read on Ash Wednesday as Christ-followers enter the penitent season of Lent:

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming. It is close at hand—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness. Like dawn spreading across the mountains a large and mighty army comes, such as never was in ancient times nor ever will be in ages to come. Before them fire devours, behind them a flame blazes. Before them the land is like the garden of Eden, behind them, a desert waste—nothing escapes them. They have the appearance of horses; they gallop along like cavalry. With a noise like that of chariots they leap over the mountaintops, like a crackling fire consuming stubble, like a mighty army drawn up for battle. At the sight of them, nations are in anguish; every face turns pale. They

charge like warriors; they scale walls like soldiers. They all march in line, not swerving from their course. They do not jostle each other; each marches straight ahead. They plunge through defenses without breaking ranks. They rush upon the city; they run along the wall. They climb into the houses; like thieves they enter through the windows. Before them the earth shakes, the heavens tremble, the sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine. The Lord thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty is the army that obeys his command. The day of the Lord is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it? (Joel 2:1-11, NIV)

This is a terrifying prophecy. It talks about everything being wiped out and being turned into a wasteland. How do the people escape it? How do the people avoid it? It seems there would be no way around it or over it. Such is the cycle of Israel's history. It is a land that has been conquered and captured and destroyed and rebuilt and conquered again. Israel has even been broken off into pieces and its people assimilated. Yet, a remnant always remains. Israel always rebounds.

Joel in that moment is telling the people of Judah, the remnant of Israel that remains, there are dark days ahead. Something terrible is coming and you need to be ready for it. It's going to be devastating. But wait... We might not be able to avoid what happens, but if we turn our hearts toward God, perhaps God will relent.

Then Joel gives them the secret of how to start to build something better. This is a point in scripture where the poetry of the Old Testament comes out. The way through, Joel tells the people in the very next verses after that terrible prophecy, can be summed up in these words from verse 13, "rend your hearts and not your garments."

Rend your hearts and not your garments.

It was a practice in the Biblical world when you were in anguished lament, or when you were being penitent; repenting of sin, to tear your clothing as an outward sign of your repentant nature or the pain that was supposed to be recognized in your mourning. Joel, by using this imagery, is telling the people of Judah that tearing their clothing means nothing. If you really want to repent... If you really want to have a come-to-the-Lord moment... If you really want God to hear you, to understand you and show merciful compassion, to possibly relent from bringing this destruction that's coming, then rend your heart.

Dark times are a part of life. There is no way around them. There is no way over them. There is no way to avoid every troubled time. But... there can be a way through dark times if we hold to faith in our hearts and stay committed to God's compassionate truth.

How do we get from Jesus' end time vision to Isaiah's Utopia? By, filled and even armed with our faith, going through dark times, troubled times, unsteady times, times of disaster.

There is not, nor has there ever been, a life that is not touched by disaster. There is not one person who in some way does not know pain, or anguish, or loss. Some of us are lucky. For some of us that experience is much less. We go through life, we have a few hard times, we experience the death and loss of loved ones and that's all. For others, that pain and anguish is so much deeper.

Countries are invaded, homes are destroyed, loved ones don't just die but are taken in tragic and violent ways.

And yet, Jesus says to trust and to keep the faith. Jesus says, "I will guide you through it. Work for the kingdom of God. Strive for the kingdom of God through whatever the world throws at you."

We do this by showing the world the kingdom of God precisely because the world is broken. By working through the brokenness, for the healing of the brokenness, we will move through the brokenness toward Isaiah's Utopia. We are not called to live in a utopia that just appears. We are called to strive for a utopia that we have a hand in building.

Jesus, when he preached on the kingdom, was never saying it was far off and not yet or in another reality of dimension. Jesus, by all that he did and said, was teaching the people this is how we build the kingdom here and now.

How do we get from Jesus' end time vision to Isaiah's Utopia? We build Isaiah's Utopia. We work to build the kingdom of God here and now.

We do this a little bit in our church families, creating safe space for people to come and be part of something bigger, through our Safe Sanctuaries policies. We know the world can be dangerous. We know that there are things and situations we need to watch out for. We know there are realities of the world we need to protect vulnerable people from; our children and our vulnerable adults. So we have Safe Sanctuaries policies to keep the kingdom safe in our buildings and at our events.

Those policies include having two adults present to watch our children in our nursery and our Sunday FunZone. Our staff and our volunteers are all Safe Sanctuaries trained to be aware of situations that may occur and how to respond in an emergency. Background checks are completed for all of our volunteers who will be working with vulnerable persons. Line of sight is very important for maintaining safety during our activities and events.

These are all practices this congregation has decided we're going to follow to keep our people and our guests safe. We're going to do our best to promote kingdom living here to hopefully create a piece of the safety we strive for in building the kingdom of God here and now. Because we want people to feel safe and welcome, here in this place, where they come to worship, to participate in ministry, to live into their faith, live out their faith, and learn about their faith.

That's just what we're doing in the building to help build a piece of the kingdom. There's a whole lot more to do outside of this building in the world. We are called even more so to live out our faith and build the kingdom out there. How do we build Isaiah's Utopia in the world? By going out and loving the people of the world in their brokenness.

Ellyn Dubberly is a missionary to El Salvador who visited us here a couple weeks ago. Her work is very much about building Utopia, building the kingdom in El Salvador. Ellyn's work is about education. She brings education and opportunity to a poor community and a people who otherwise may not have had accessible education where they are. The school program she is a part of is bringing kingdom values to the community where she serves. Ellyn is building the kingdom

of God in El Salvador and it is working. The school began with around a dozen kids and is now a school with a student body of over 500. It is a kingdom building ministry that brings to the children of El Salvador a future that may not have otherwise been possible without kingdom-love in action.

How do we get from Jesus' end time vision to Isaiah's Utopia? We hold faith in Christ. We work through the brokenness. We build opportunities so the world may learn of the kingdom of God, because the world needs to learn what the love of God is capable of doing in each and every one of us. Let us go out and let us build the kingdom, here and now.

In Jesus' name, Amen.