

The Joy of the Kingdom

Isaiah 35:1-7, 10; Matthew 11:25-35

Today, the third Sunday of Advent is Joy Sunday, and the color of the candle is pink, appropriately so, for in Isaiah's prophecy the desert is in bloom. If you live in a desert expanse you see it happen, after rains wild flowers bursting into bloom. And once in a while there is what is called a "superbloom" where, after sustained rains, millions of seeds which had laid dormant for a long time burst into life, and the desert is resplendent with color.

That's what the kingdom of God is like, a desert in full bloom. Deserts aren't really dead places. Isaiah used this vision to announce that after so long a time in Babylonian exile the people were returning home. Joy!

Where the kingdom is, there is joy. But we can reverse the sentence too: Wherever joy is, there is the kingdom of God. I think Jesus leads us there in his answer to the question John the Baptist sent him, a rather startling question.

I

John the Baptist was in Herod's prison. He had denounced Herod one time too many. Called by God to preach repentance to the nation, John did, warning destruction if they didn't turn back to God. He called the religious leaders a "pit

of snakes.” He called Herod worse. He said God was about to lay an axe to the tree of Israel.

When Jesus came to him to be baptized John saw him as the Messiah, “the one who is to come”, the one who would rescue the nation and set all things right. He had said, “I baptize with water, but he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire!”

But now John is in prison, soon to be beheaded at the request of a dancing girl at Herod’s feast. And doubts began to arise, about his mission and about Jesus. “Was I wrong about it all? Was it all worth it?” In Erick Erickson’s eight stages of human development, the last stage is Ego-Integrity vs. Despair. Was it worth it?

The prevailing thought about when the Messiah comes may have been John’s: when the Messiah comes all will be made right and all will be made well. The Messiah would free the nation from Rome’s oppression and everyone would turn back to God. Peace and joy would reign, and it would happen, just like that, in an instant!

But it hadn’t happened like that, and John grew despondent. This is how Matthew summarized what Jesus was saying and doing:

And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in all the synagogues and preaching the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity. When he saw the crowds he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:35-36).

Had John been wrong? About the kingdom, about the Messiah, about Jesus? There was the Holy Spirit, but more compassion than fire.

So he sent his disciples to Jesus with the question: “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?”

How would Jesus take such a question? He didn't get defensive, he didn't quote scripture to prove he was the Messiah, he didn't put John down for his doubts. He didn't even answer the question directly. He said to John's messengers:

Go tell John what you hear and see: the blind receiving their sight, the lame walking, lepers cleansed, the deaf hear, people's souls getting raised from the dead. And the poor, they are getting good news preached to them, *brought* to them. (Matthew 9: 35-36)

Don't lose heart, John! The kingdom is coming, and its all about. Not like you envisioned, but its here in healing, compassion, joy and help for the poor.

II

So, as we think about the joy of the kingdom today, I want to *de-church* it and *de-mystify* it. The church doesn't own the kingdom. Sometimes it's not even *close* to it. It is not some spooky mysterious thing only a few know about. The kingdom is so much broader and deeper than we think. It is everywhere, within us, among us, between us, beyond us. Everywhere. Open your eyes and see!

So, and here is where I think Jesus is going, instead of saying where the kingdom is, there is joy, he reversed it: wherever joy is, there is the kingdom. And it's all around.

I quote one of my favorite poets, Mary Oliver, again:

If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy,

don't hesitate. Give in to it...

Anyway, whatever it is, don't be afraid

of its plenty. Joy is not meant to be a crumb. ¹

So we can go on and on. Wherever you see justice happening, there is the kingdom, no matter how slow its coming.

Whenever, wherever people are getting well, becoming whole, there the kingdom is.

And when you see the poor being lifted up and all God's children given dignity and worth, there is the kingdom.

And what about all the beauty in the world? Deserts in bloom? Fall leaves in full color, the blue mountains, the sunsets and streams. *Where beauty is, the kingdom is.*

So what is our job in the world in face of such beauty? It is to be astonished and full of wonder, to be surprised by joy.

Again, here are the words of Mary Oliver in her poem "Messenger"

My work is loving the world

Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird—

equal seekers of sweetness.

Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums....

Let me

keep my mind on what matters,

which is my work,

which is mostly standing still, and learning to be

astonished....

which is mostly rejoicing...

which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart

and these body-clothes,
 a mouth with which to give shouts of joy ²

Where the kingdom is there are shouts of joy, and that sweet quiet joy too.

III

What else? There is the work of the kingdom to do, doing justice, loving mercy, lifting up the fallen, making peace. There is joy here too. The political commentator, David Brooks calls what we feel when we are about such work “moral joy”. It happens when we are doing what is right, making the world a better, kinder, more inhabitable place for all to live.

Sometimes when we are about such good work we feel like life has slipped into its right groove; we feel the pleasure of God.

Wendell Berry says “Pleasure perfects work, and is its indispensable measure”. “It all turns on affection”, he writes.³ Our work becomes good work when affection is involved, you love the land you work, the students you teach. You see the “bloom” in their faces when they learn something new. You have affection for people you work with, the ones you serve. *Loving the world*: that’s part of what it means to imitate God!

The famous writer E.B. White who wrote *Charlotte’s Web* wrote in the N.Y. Times awhile back:

I arise every morning torn between the desire to improve (or save) the world and a desire to enjoy (or savor) the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.

That's it, the work of the kingdom: to savor and to save. Both! And it might make it hard to plan the day. Savoring gives you the energy to help save it.

IV

As Paul was seeking to translate the gospel for the Hellenistic mind, he often called what Jesus called the kingdom of God the “New Creation”. God was transforming the old creation with its divisions and dis-ease, with its tribalism and animosities into the New Creation. It is happening all about, if we have eyes to see. As the song from Hamilton goes, “Look Around!”

We may get discouraged by the state of the world or the progress of the kingdom—as John was in Herod’s prison. The words of theologian Paul Tillich have encouraged me:

We want to show you something we have seen and to tell you something we have heard: that in the midst of the old creation there is a New Creation....

We want to communicate to you an experience we have had that *here and there* in the world and *now and then* in ourselves is a New Creation. ⁴

That seems just right to me. Here and there in the world, now and then in ourselves, the New Creation happens, the kingdom of God happens. Blossom by blossom. And when it happens, what we experience is, you guessed it, joy!

1. Mary Oliver, “Don’t Hesitate”, *Swan: Poems and Prose Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 42.
2. Mary Oliver, “Messenger”, *Thirst* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 1
3. Wendell Berry, *It All Turns on Affection* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2012).
4. Paul Tillich, *The New Being* (N.Y.: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955), 18.