

February 9, 2020
The Kingdom of God is Coming: So What?
Matthew 4:12-17

When the January 17 blizzard dropped a record-breaking 76 centimetres of snow on St. John's, NF, with winds gusting over 150 kilometres per hour, it was not a surprise. They knew it was coming for at five days. They actually knew it was coming for more than five days. They know it will happen again. According to the federal *Canada's Changing Climate Report* published last year, the Atlantic region is facing rising seas, falling coastlines, and more intense storms. That's a matter of scientific observation and oceanic physics, not opinion. Brad DeYoung, an oceanographer at Memorial University, commented, "*What this storm showed is that we're not really prepared either for the increased intensity of storms, or the possibility that such storms could become more frequent.*"

Warnings about an approaching event are always important. We need to know what's coming and the potential implications, so we know what action to take.

As Jesus moves from His temptation in the wilderness, He announces the kingdom of heaven is coming. On the one hand, the Jewish people have known this for centuries: the ancient prophets had announced the coming of the Messiah, but it always seemed a long way off, so they didn't do much about it. On the other hand, Jesus says, it is here NOW. The kingdom has come NOW. We need to know what action to take. We'll come to that ...

Some Background

If you read through the gospels you notice the phrases over and over "*the Kingdom of Heaven*" in Matthew and "*the Kingdom of God.*" For instance, a lot of Jesus' 40-ish parables begin "*The Kingdom of heaven/God is like ...*" Jesus self-consciously sees Himself bringing in the kingdom of God/heaven; it defines His mission. Matthew is Jewish – Luke is Greek/Gentile/non-Jewish. Jewish people would not speak aloud the word "God" (YHWH in Hebrew). So Matthew will not say Kingdom of "God"; he substitutes the word "heaven." Luke, not being Jewish, is just fine with saying the word "God."

Jesus, of course, lived in a time when people knew all about kings and kingdoms. Kingdoms were places where kings ruled. And kings were absolute rulers. What they said was law. To oppose them was treason. To talk about a new kingdom coming was definitely dangerous.

The Jewish people had lived under the rule of a series of foreign kingdoms: the Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, and now the Romans. The Romans had installed the Herods as "kings of Judea," but they weren't even Jewish; they were Edomites, Israel's traditional enemies. The Herods were nasty: Herod the Great, king when Jesus was born, slaughtered children in Bethlehem and, in his paranoia, executed most of his own family including his wife. His son, Herod Antipas, married his niece/brother's wife, arrested John the Baptist, and had him beheaded at the request of his step-daughter. The Jewish people yearned for freedom.

The Jews weren't just eager for freedom the way most occupied people understood freedom.

The Jewish people sincerely believed the one God, the creator of and supreme power in the universe, had chosen them as His special people. It couldn't be God's will to have other nations ruling them. What's more, God had promise in their scriptures that one day He would rescue them and make all things right. These prophecies proclaimed that God would become King. He would be King not only of Israel, but of the whole world. God, as King, would bring true justice, true peace, and would turn this upside-down world right way up again. God's Kingdom would come, and His will would be done on earth as it was in heaven. That is what earnest Jews longed for, prayer for, worked for, and were willing to die for.

They also believed this would happen by God's people rising in rebellion, waging a military and political war with the foreigners, driving out anyone who was not Jewish to re-establish a pure Jewish state, and taking over the corridors of power in government.

Jesus is saying this new Kingdom has finally come. The long anticipated "storm" has come. That would have gotten people's attention. Any first century Jew who heard someone talking about God's Kingdom or the Kingdom of Heaven would know this was revolutionary talk. This was a direct threat to the power of Rome and the power of the "kings of the Jews," like Herod Antipas. They would have listened closely to Jesus ...

What does Jesus say?

What action are we to take? Jesus says, "*Repent!*"(4:17). That's not what people expected or wanted to hear. It was not a searing condemnation of foreigners. It was not a patriotic call to arms and siren call to make Israel great again. Jesus says, do you want to be prepared for the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven/God? Then ***you*** have to repent.

What does that mean? Sometimes we think that "to repent" means "to feel bad about yourself." Or it means "to feel sorry about some of the wrong things you might have done." "To repent" is not a word that speaks about our feelings at all. It is an action word. It means "to change direction." It means "to turn around and go the other way." It means "to stop what you're doing and do the opposite." How you ***feel*** about it isn't really important. It's what you ***do*** that 's important.

To Jesus' revolutionary-minded countrymen, He is telling them they're going in the wrong direction. They need to make a U-turn and pursue a radically different course. The standard kind of revolution – fighting, killing, taking over the government, establishing an earthly kingdom – is completely the wrong goal.

- If people are going to be judgmental, they will find themselves on the sharp side of judgment – the Jews were persecuted. They did not find the kingdom of God.
- If people are sabre-rattling for war, then they will have war and all the horror that brings with it: in three Jewish-Roman wars, Jews tried to win by bloodshed and ended up slaughtered by the Romans. They did not find the kingdom of God.
- If people are bent on hating their (non-Jewish) neighbours and want to drive them out, then they will create a culture of hate that will catch them in its clutches: for causing problem after problem, the Jewish people were deliberately scattered by the

Romans. They certainly did not find the Kingdom of God.

What is the Kingdom of God really like? It's the complete opposite of that.

After John the Baptist's arrest, *"Jesus left Nazareth, and he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake (Sea of Galilee) in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali (Capernaum is in the land granted to these tribes back in Joshua's day) (Matthew 4:13).*

Matthew then quotes from Isaiah 9, a passage we often read during Advent: *"This fulfills what was said through the prophet Isaiah: 'Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles (Galilee was a crossroads of major east-west and north-south trade routes) – the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned'" (Isaiah 9:1-2).*

Matthew quotes this passage, of course, to say that Jesus is that great new light that is coming into a dark world. He could have gone on to quote more from Isaiah 9: *"Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever" (9:5-7).*

This is a different kind of Kingdom. A different kind of king. It's a radical U-turn from the kingdoms and kings of our world, too. Not many of our politicians aspire to destroy their arsenals, or to be known as "wonderful counselors," "loving fathers," or "princes of peace."

What does this mean for us today?

We live in dark times, too. But ours is a different world than that of the world into which Jesus came. We're not waiting for the kingdom of God as they were: in Jesus, the kingdom of God HAS come. We are not waiting for the King to arrive: the King HAS come. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, He has destroyed the power of sin and death, once, for all, forever. His Holy Spirit HAS come – His presence, power, wisdom, and comfort – so we can face the world in God's power, with His wisdom, and His comfort. The kingdom is within us.

What action should we take? Like the Jews before Jesus, one temptation is (metaphorically) to go on a crusade, to force our will and our way. Jesus says, *"Repent! ... Blessed are peacemakers ..."* A second temptation is to blame other people for our ills, exclude other people, build walls to keep other people out. Jesus says, *"Repent! ... Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you ..."* A third temptation is to be outspoken, angry and judgmental. Jesus says, *"Repent! ... Do not judge, or you too will be judged ..."*

The kingdom of God has come. Jesus, the king, has come. We have His Holy Spirit within us. The kingdom is within us. Our reality is different because He is with us.

I think of Sharon Wood, who in her quiet way was a more profound witness to the love, strength, and power of Jesus than many high-profile media personalities. I think of Ruth Elzinga, who saw things in the schools and the community she thought needed to be changed. Then patiently, wisely – and with a lot of hard work and determination, she found constructive, helpful ways to get involved and to build a better city. I think of Walter Penner, who lived a quiet, gentle, unassuming life, caring about all those with whom he came in contact. He was a loving father and grandfather, who modeled the love of Jesus. If we're not going to be the love of Jesus to our families, who is?

What action should we take? Jesus still says, "*Repent!*" Stop for a moment and do a Jesus-focussed reality check ...

1. What direction do I need to STOP going in? What do I need to STOP doing? The greatest command, Jesus says, is "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind*" (Matthew 26:37). Is that the spirit in which I am living my life? If not, what needs to change? The second great commandment is "*Love your neighbor as yourself*" (26:39). Is that the spirit in which I am living my life? If not, what needs to change?
2. What direction do I need to START going in? What do I need to START doing? How can I live out the command, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind*"? What does that look like, practically, in my life? How can I live out the command, "*Love your neighbor as yourself*"? What does that look like, practically, in my life?

In 1 Corinthians 13:1-7, Paul writes, "*If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*"

What if we substituted our own names? Bruce is patient, Bruce is kind. Bruce does not envy, Bruce does not boast, Bruce is not proud. Bruce does not dishonor others, Bruce is not self-seeking, Bruce is not easily angered, Bruce keeps no record of wrongs. Bruce does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. Bruce always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." Hmmm ... Are there things I need to work on?

The kingdom of God has come. The Holy Spirit is in us. The Kingdom is within us. We are the light of world. What action should we take? Repent. And then be the love of Jesus ...