

“God Comes to Galilee”

Introduction: The preliminaries are over. Most likely, Zechariah and Elizabeth have died. Joseph and Mary are off somewhere enjoying retirement and time with grandchildren. The shepherds have long since returned to their fields and the magi their kingdoms. John the Baptist, whose role it was to prepare people for the arrival of Jesus now finds himself in prison for calling into question the moral character of a local leader. And so there is just Jesus, on center stage at last. Of course, it has always been about Jesus, but now that the preliminaries are out of the way, Matthew will go on to spend the next twenty plus chapters outlining the life of Jesus and in particular, what it means for Jesus to have said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

Speaking of coming near, someone asked me last week if we’re near to returning to 1 Corinthians (which we began in September and took a break from once advent began). We will return! But I often feel that coming out of the Christmas season and thinking about a letter that has to do with the church is like trying to go directly from first to fourth gear (for those of you who remember manual transmission). So, I feel moved to spend the next few months thinking about Jesus, and about how he has inaugurated the kingdom of God, how, with his arrival, the dimension of heaven has begun to break into the dimension of earth. In particular, beginning next week, we’re going to pay attention to how he describes life in God’s kingdom through the well-known but often perplexing Sermon on the Mount. Then, after Easter, I promise, we’ll go back to 1 Corinthians and continue explore what the presence of the kingdom looks like for the life of the church.

For today, if Jesus is Immanuel, “God with us” (Ma. 1:23), what did it look like when God came to Galilee to reveal his kingdom? Remembering that we live in this “already-not yet” time, with the kingdom of God having been inaugurated with the first coming of Jesus but not being fully complete or consummated until his return, what does *where* he begins, and *how* he begins, tell us about the kind of life Jesus invites us to live in God’s kingdom? What was so enticing about it? As some have helpfully observed, Jesus was not so much concerned about getting us into heaven as he was about getting heaven into us. The more we can get our arms around that, the more we might be willing, just like those ancient fishermen, to follow where he leads.

I. Where He Begins

A. The region of Galilee, you might not know, is beautiful. It is found some fifty miles north of Jerusalem and contains a large fresh water lake, often called the Sea of Galilee, which is about 14 miles long and seven miles wide. This lake is nestled between mountains to its east and west of over 2,500 feet, which makes it quite picturesque. It is also 600 feet below sea level, which keeps it wonderfully warm. It is well stocked with both fish, and clear sandy beaches. The Jordan River feeds it and runs through it, from snow capped mountains in the north to the Dead Sea 65 miles to the south, all of which adds luscious agriculture to the magnificent waters and rolling hillsides. In addition, the region boasted a theatre and a stadium, as well as mansions and palaces. So, this is no cultural backwater we’re talking about.

B. And yet, to a good Jew, there was a great darkness that filled the area because the region’s population was largely Gentile in nature. It had been that way since the invasion of Assyria several hundred years earlier which had “humbled,” as Isaiah put it, the territories of Zebulun and Naphtali, named after two of the twelve tribes of Israel that had settled there centuries earlier. So, while Galilee might have been a beautiful place to live, it had been overrun

with Gentiles. Their pagan gods, lifestyle, and worldview were dominant. To one seeking to be true to the Lord, it felt like living in the shadow of death. The Jews may have been back in the Promised Land after their physical exile to Babylon, but spiritually and politically it seemed as if the exile was still a reality.

Illustration: Last Sunday evening Rama returned from a week in Malibu (where she said she had to go as part of a class for her master's program!). Like Galilee, she said Malibu was beautiful, as southern California would be to a New Englander in the middle of this polar vortex of a January, but that it was also dark. She stayed at a Franciscan monastery which was situated in, and clinging to the Lord in the midst of, great opulence, marked by folks living in gated estates and driving around in Bentley's. Like the Jews experienced in Galilee, despite the beauty, the pagan influence was real, and even dark.

C. But it is to this dark region that God comes, in the person of his Son, and in which Jesus ministers, for almost a year, as best as we can figure. The really cool part is that this is what Isaiah had prophesied. Those living in the darkness of Galilee of the Gentiles would see a great light. Hope would be theirs, for in the child who would be born, a light would dawn. He would go on to reign, as those well-known verses from Isaiah 9 declare, on David's throne and over his kingdom, bringing justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. So this Jesus, who declares that with his arrival, the kingdom of heaven has come near, is one who comes in the midst of darkness to establish God's reign and rule and in so doing, to bring us hope. He has come, not to help us escape into heaven, but to bring heaven into us. How does he do that?

II. How He Begins

A. Once settled in the Galilean town of Capernaum Jesus begins his ministry. We see three aspects of it, as Matthew summarizes for us. First, he calls people to repent. To repent does not mean feeling bad about yourself; it is an invitation to change direction, to change your way of thinking because an intimate interactive life with God was now being offered. Specifically, it means to turn from going our own way and to start going God's way. What the Jews in the region of Galilee would have to learn is that Jesus' invitation to repent would not only be directed at the Gentiles to turn from their pagan ways, but also at them.

As N.T. Wright puts it in his new work, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, "If Israel is chosen to be the people through whom the creator will put the world to rights what happens when Israel itself needs to be put to rights?" (p. 183). They would need to turn not only from their own unfaithfulness, but also from the hostile and militaristic ways in which many wanted to bring about God's kingdom. They would need to learn that fighting darkness with darkness would only bring about more darkness. They would need to begin to learn the way of healing and forgiveness as Jesus would reveal it in the way and wisdom of the cross. For Jew as well as Gentile, the kind of life Jesus invites us to live begins with naming, through repentance, where we have not been engaged in kingdom of God thinking and living.

B. The second way Jesus begins to inaugurate the kingdom when he comes to Galilee follows from the first, but in a surprising way. He calls people to follow him. We see this as he walks by the Sea of Galilee and calls four different fishermen to follow him. This wasn't the first time they had encountered Jesus. From John's gospel account, we learn that they began to spend time with him as much as a year earlier, and had likely accompanied him to the wedding at Cana as well as other events. But now Jesus calls them to a particular kingdom task. They will play a foundational role in the church, leaving their small businesses to bear eye-witness to the world all that Jesus will go on to say and do.

But what is surprising, because it is highly irregular, is that it is Jesus who takes the initiative. Ordinarily, it would have been the student who would have made application to a rabbi. And those who dared to approach a rabbi would already have gone through a rigorous system of qualifying tests to prove that they had the right resume to be selected. Instead, Jesus initiates, and with unschooled, ordinary, even somewhat rough around the edges men, not based upon test scores or diplomas or past experience or how many fish they had caught or how much faith they had expressed, but simply because *he* believed in *them*.

What someone believes about us changes everything, does it not? And God believes, as we heard last week, that we are his beloved children with whom he is well pleased, and that before we have done anything in and for his kingdom. Right away, we see that this is how Jesus is going to work. By his grace, he's just going to call people to himself and invite them to live in the light of the kingdom of God. What's more, his promise is that he will make something of us. To be sure, not everyone is called to leave behind his or her profession. Yet, whether we are a preacher or a plumber, a teacher or a technician, a farmer or physical therapist, we are called to join with Jesus in revealing to our daily world the good news of the arrival of the king, and of life in his kingdom. But who wouldn't want to do that, if it means sharing our experience of his love for us?

If the inaugurator of the kingdom of God has come, entered our darkness to bring us hope, and has invited us to turn and follow him, then it is in joining him in his kingdom work, however that works out in our lives, that we will find the life that is really life.

C. A third aspect we want to notice, as we consider how Jesus begins to reveal the presence of God's kingdom and the kind of life he invites us to live, is that he cares for the body, as well as for the soul. Yes, he is interested in repentance. Yes, he is concerned about forgiving our sin and restoring our relationship to God. But as he makes his way around Galilee teaching and proclaiming, we see that he is also interested in caring for the physical needs that are presented to him. Yes, these healings demonstrate the powerful presence of the kingdom of God in Jesus. Every disease, every sickness, even demon-possession, falls within his authority to heal. But he also heals because he has compassion. And as he heals, he reveals the wholeness that the kingdom of God brings.

There is, sadly, often a dichotomy between ministry to the body and ministry to the soul. Some churches or schools of thought stress personal conversion while ignoring the desperate physical needs of those around them. Other churches or schools of thought address social injustices but neglect spiritual needs. Jesus, however, knew of no such dichotomy. As he began his ministry in Galilee, we see that he cared about people in their totality. He both preached the need for repentance, and demonstrated a concern for compassion and justice. Who wouldn't want to follow a leader like this?

Jesus would later say, "I have come that they [you] may have life, and have it to the full" (Jn. 10:b). Those fishermen down by the sea must have had some sense for the fullness of life that Jesus was offering and they couldn't wait to get started. May we pay attention to the life that this same Jesus is offering, that when he says "Come, follow me," for the first time, or again and again and again, we might be willing to lay down whatever of our stuff that gets in the way, and go.