

THE RADICAL RABBI: "A KINGDOM IS COMING"

(Matthew 4:17)

6.7.20

INTRODUCTION

This week, when it seemed like all the news was about the unrest all around our country, including, unfortunately, the Twin Cities, I heard a word that I don't think I had heard since I took a political science class back in school. That word was "anarchist." So I looked it up to be sure I understood what that word meant, but all I found was that I actually needed to look up the word "anarchy," because anarchists simply are ones who support anarchy, which by itself wasn't particularly helpful. So, this is what I found when I looked up the word "anarchy": "A state of disorder due to absence or no recognition of authority." It comes from a term first used in 1539 which meant "absence of government," referring to a state of lawlessness or political disorder due to the absence of governmental authority. It is also the political belief some people advance of a society which meets everyone's needs without the need of government.

As I read that, I realized that the Bible also defines "anarchy" and, in so doing, redefines it or amplifies its meaning by making anarchy not a matter of a random, unorganized and often violent response to perceived wrongs or injustice, but rather simply a matter of a willful, sin-directed heart:

- 1) The OT book of Judges ends with these words: ***In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit - Judges 21:25.*** The NASB, ESV and NKJV translate those final words in a way that provides even more clarity: *Everyone did what was right in his own eyes - Judges 21:25b.* Now that's anarchy.
- 2) Now while the Judges verse describes the outcome, the OT prophet Isaiah, writing some 700 years before the arrival of Jesus, showed the heart inside the person doing whatever they felt like doing: ***We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way - Isaiah 53:6a.*** That's anarchy, too.
- 3) As a result, as the apostle Paul predicted to Timothy, that "anarchist heart" that Isaiah described would continue to define unrepentant human beings right on to the end of time; he said: ***But mark ("realize" - NASB) ("understand" - ESV) ("know" - NKJV) this: There will be terrible ("difficult" - NASB, ESV) ("perilous" - NKJV) times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud ("arrogant" - NASB, ESV), abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful ("unthankful" - NKJV), unholy, without love ("heartless" - ESV), unforgiving ("irreconcilable" - NASB) ("unappeasable" - ESV), slanderous ("malicious gossips" - NASB), without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good ("haters of good" - NASB) ("despisers of good" - NKJV), treacherous ("traitors" - NKJV), rash ("reckless" - NASB, ESV) ("headstrong" - NKJV), conceited ("swollen with conceit" - ESV) ("haughty" - NKJV), lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God- Paul, II Timothy 3:1-4.***

And where does anarchy lead? The OT book of Proverbs tells us (and the NASB translates it well): ***Where there is no guidance the people fall - Proverbs 11:14a (NASB).*** Humanity has

proven, over and over again, that they are completely helpless. Nobody knows that better than God- which is why, through His Son, He announced what we will be looking at today. But before we begin, let's turn to God for a **moment of prayer**.

TEXT

Following the arrest of John the Baptist for speaking out against King Herod Antipas' unlawful marriage to his brother's wife and, in Herod's view, refusing to "shut up" about it, Jesus traveled from Judea back to Galilee. But instead of returning to His hometown of Nazareth, we learn that He settled in the town of Capernaum - a fishing village of about 1,500 located on the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee. And it was in this place that the world first heard Jesus' message - and our text for today (harmonizing the words of both Matthew and Mark's gospels: *From that time on Jesus began to preach, "[The time has come.] Repent [and believe the good news ("gospel")], for the kingdom of heaven has come near" - Matthew 4:17 (including Mark 1:15).*

So, first things first, what is a kingdom? In our modern day, we may be a little hazy on exactly what a "kingdom" is. According to the dictionary, a kingdom is "a country, state or territory ruled by a king or queen." OK, so there is going to be a ruler, somebody with the power and authority to be able to rule over people. OK, now right away, any audience would be able to understand one thing very clearly. This kingdom that Jesus was announcing wasn't going to be about them. But they had known that from their own first kingdom. When their ancestors had come to Samuel and told him, "We want a king, like everybody else around us," he was very clear in what they should expect if indeed a king was appointed over them: *He said, "This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: - 1 Samuel 8:11a.* His point? The rulers of kingdoms lead for their own purposes and pleasures. Their desires, their wishes, their commands are the only voices that matter. If this was a kingdom, there was going to be somebody in charge, whose word was the end of discussion.

Now an initial reaction might be: You're kidding, right? That's your opening gambit, your first words of outreach - talking about a kingdom, and being ruled, again? Good luck with that one, pal.

Israel had a ton of memories of kingdoms - some great, some not so great. David and his son Solomon had built a great one, the envy of the world at that time - and one that many Jews yearned to return to. And then there had also been some not-so-great memories: being conquered and ruled over by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, and the Greeks. And as if those memories weren't enough, every day they faced the reality of occupation by another kingdom, maybe the greatest one the world had yet seen - the kingdom of the Roman Empire.

They had also dealt with local rulers - Herod the Great comes to mind. Some great achievements, especially in the area of building or improving pre-existing landmarks (the temple in Jerusalem is a great example) and awe-inspiring monuments. But he was also nuts, often seeming to be insanely insecure in holding onto whatever authority the Romans had granted him - even to the point of murdering members of his own family.

Bottom line: The people of Israel, for better, and often for worse, knew about kingdoms. But right away, Jesus' announcement of a coming kingdom came across as something unlike anything that they had known before. In other words, if they took the time to really grasp His words, this kingdom was going to be saying: "Get used to different," in several ways:

- 1) Urgency. Borrowing from Mark's gospel: **"The time has come"- Jesus Christ, Mark 1:15a.** Jesus is giving us a sense that this is not a kingdom about which membership is something that can be put off for a more convenient time, or "I'll have to think about it," or other similar responses. He is essentially saying, "I am telling you of a kingdom that will require a decision on your part - a decision that needs to happen." And you almost get the impression of "this is a limited-time offer" that we often hear in advertising today. The Greek tells us that Jesus is essentially telling His audience: "For a long time, this heavenly kingdom has been a future promise - a vision of prophets stretching back centuries. But I'm here to tell you: That time is completed; this heavenly kingdom is near, and present - and now!"
- 2) Repentance: From Matthew's gospel: **"Repent" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 4:17b.** This is a place where Jesus is continuing the message of His forerunner, John the Baptist, who had filled His messages with that same word, and even added to its meaning: **"Produce fruit in keeping with repentance" - John the Baptist, Matthew 3:8.** So, what is Jesus telling us about this kingdom? He was telling His audience that membership in this kingdom was going to be about far more than simply showing up or going through some kind of religious motions. It's going to be a kingdom based on "new life": To "repent" means to turn one's life around, doing things completely different than they have been done before, literally a spiritual "U-turn" that impacts your entire life - new ways to express, new ways to respond, new ways to think. Somehow, to live in this kingdom is going to mean living unlike any way people have lived before. Paul famously presented the idea like this: **Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! - Paul, II Corinthians 5:17.** Jesus is calling for life change in a profound and foundational way, a simultaneous turning from sin and a turning to God, going from a direction that seeks only for self to a new direction that seeks only for God. And tying that to John's words about producing fruit in keeping with repentance tells us that, in this kingdom, membership is intended to look like something, repentance being not only an inner transformation but an outer showing of that change that the world can see, as Jesus would later explain like this: **"[L]et your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:16.** And this is not a salvation directed to a nation, but rather to individuals. In other words, the growth of God's kingdom will come one person at a time - because each person is personally and individually extended an invitation to repent.

- 3) Belief. This is not in the sense of uttering "I believe" when speaking the words of a creed (in other words, not simply rote repetition) but our very lives relying on something, being so fully and completely persuaded about something that, as a result, we can place full confidence in it and completely trust it. And what is it to which Jesus is directing our complete and total faith? Believe, He says, in the gospel - in other words, in the good news of the kingdom that Jesus is just now beginning to proclaim, the "good tidings of great joy" that the angels proclaimed at His birth, and meaning the announcing of what it will require of people to become members of this kingdom. The good news will also encompass Jesus' death, which will be the purchase price for citizenship in this kingdom, recognizing that surrendering to Jesus' salvation is the only way for somebody to be seen as matching God's sense of purity. The good news will further include Jesus' burial, resurrection, ascension, and His promise to return for the members of His kingdom and, eventually, establishing that kingdom - an eternal kingdom that will never pass away.
- 4) Heavenly. This is not going to be like any earthly kingdom. It will be a heavenly kingdom - meaning a kingdom reflective of God and existing for God and ruled by God. It's going to be a kingdom completely based around God. Jesus said the kingdom of heaven had come near. So that had to mean that this kingdom Jesus is announcing has nothing to do with how kingdoms operate here on earth. In fact, some three years later, Jesus Himself would be telling a Roman governor: ***"My kingdom is not of this world" - Jesus Christ, John 18:36a.*** And ultimately, in some way, it is going to be a kingdom that is, in every way, completely pleasing to God. This kingdom will function within the world but never be a part of the world. Now the nation of Israel had understood God's rule, at least in theory, since the time of David; he had written: ***Dominion belongs to the Lord and He rules over the nations - David, Psalm 22:28.*** But this kingdom will be one that is pleasing to God because it will be one that both cherishes and follows the very pleasures of God.

And through all this, Jesus Himself is the divine herald - announcing this kingdom, and Himself, to the world. And for the next three years, the world will be hearing things and seeing things and considering things unlike at any other time in history. And that message, and that kingdom, continues to proclaim to this day!

APPLICATION

So, some 2,000 years ago Jesus of Nazareth made this amazing, history-making announcement. So, what are some takeaways from this moment, that has reverberated down through the ages?

- 1) The kingdom of heaven is a matter of urgency. The apostle Paul told the Corinthians: ***I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation - Paul, II Corinthians 6:2b.*** There are a couple of things we absolutely do not know: How long before Jesus calls the church out of the world to our home in heaven, and how long before the days that have been granted me come to an end. Therefore, for everybody we

know (at whatever level) - family, friend, neighbor, acquaintance, co-worker, whatever - we need to have an intentional urgency about sharing the "good news" that Jesus proclaimed. If we knew this was the last day, we were going to be alive on this planet, what would we want to tell the people around us? We need to be urgent for the kingdom with that in mind.

- 2) The kingdom of heaven is a matter of repentance. While this may seem basic, the other side of repentance is also important: The life that we now live transformed by repentance of our sins and a life now committed to Jesus Christ needs to look like something. If in fact it truly is a kingdom of heaven that Jesus is proclaiming, then we need to live like we are already citizens of that kingdom. There should be a difference in how we live - not driven by anything to do with this world but driven solely by a lived-out response to the "good news" of the kingdom. This also makes it imperative that we make it an intention of the use of our time to be in God's word, that the ways of the kingdom are always in our hearts and minds. Peter's words are worth repeating: *[G]row in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ - II Peter 3:18a*. The idea? That living in the light of repentance should be continually making us different than we have ever been before. Transforming our hearts and minds by a constant feeding of the word should be making us different than we have ever been before. To look like something different, to live like something different, we have to be rooted and based in something different.
- 3) The kingdom of heaven is a matter of believing. In other words, as Jesus explained it, this is not a matter of saying what we believe, but living what we believe by relying on God's word and God's promises. In other words, to use a picture we've used before, it's about trusting in God so completely that we are content to live our lives in God's hammock, knowing that He is holding the ends and knowing, as Paul said so well, that we can live *"anxious for nothing" - Paul, Philipians 4:6a (NASB)*. Worry comes from human beings not knowing what to do or where to turn. The Bible offers another lifestyle - not worrying about anything because God knows everything - and then living with an intentionality that declares that without hesitation. Nothing ultimately reflects what we believe more than how we live.
- 4) The kingdom of heaven is a matter of understanding where your citizenship is. If it's heaven, we have an eternity of promise beyond our imagination. And considering that everything about this world is one day going to pass away, why would we want to invest our passions and resources in this place? I love what the writer of Hebrews noted: *Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful - Hebrews 10:23*. All the promises of the eternity Christians have to look forward to should fuel and energize each day of our lives. How can it not? What on a temporary earth could possibly rival an eternal heaven?

CONCLUSION

One time when Jesus was with His disciples, the gospel of Matthew tells us about this moment: *Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.*

When He saw the crowds, He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field - Matthew 9:35-38.

And while Jesus was looking at that "plentiful harvest," He also shared this sobering warning: ***"As long as it is day, we must do the works of Him who sent Me. Night is coming, when no one can work" - Jesus Christ, John 9:4.***

Two questions moving forward:

- 1) We've all seen crowds; these last couple of weeks, we've seen a lot of angry crowds. No matter the context, do we have compassion - godly, eternity-driven, heartfelt compassion, for people - whenever, wherever and however we see them? Does it matter to each and every one of us that the majority of the people we see on any given day are not "citizens of heaven?" Does it matter so much that we are seeking the Lord's direction for what we can do about that?
- 2) Do we have Christ's passionate urgency for evangelism, for telling people our stories of salvation, for telling people the difference Jesus has made in our lives, and for asking people if they know where they are going to be spending eternity?

Two thousand years ago Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven had come near. If that was true then, imagine how true it is now. Folks let's see the world the way Jesus saw it - and then jump into His footprints to follow Him with His message wherever He leads. That's what we're here for. Let's pray!