

“A Whole New Kind of Kingdom”

What was the first thing, according to Matthew, that Jesus preached when he started his ministry? Anyone?
“Repent. The kingdom of God is at hand!” [Matthew 4:17]

I don't know about you, but I used to hear those words as a threat, or maybe not quite a threat, but a warning.
I heard those words as, “Remember your sins, be sorry for them, and confess them now,
because you never know when your life might be over,
and you'll be waiting before the Judge to see if you get into heaven or not.”

Certainly that's how those words have been and are being interpreted
by many throughout the past 2000 years and into the present day.
That word, “repent”, sounds ominous and threatening, and causes a part of me to rise up and resist and resent it.
But of course, that's not what the word “repent” actually means, is it?
Anybody recall what it means to “repent”?

In Greek, the word is *metanoia*, and means a complete change of heart,
a total transformation of one's understanding of life.
and therefore a radical reformation of the way one thinks, speaks, and acts.
While many, if not most, English translations of the Bible translate *metanoia* as *repent*
which carries negative, scary, burdensome connotations,
Eugene Peterson does a much better job in The Message by simply using the word “change”.
But even that misses something, for change can be seen
as something good or bad or as something to be feared or longed for,
and certainly if it leads to the kingdom of God, that change should be longed for –
at least for those of us who love God.

When I hear the word “*metanoia*”, what comes to mind for me is “metamorphosis” and when I think of that,
I think of what happens when a caterpillar is transformed into a butterfly.
Jesus begins his ministry by saying, “Metanoieite! Change! Be transformed!
It's no longer just a caterpillar world! The butterflies are here! The kingdom of God is at hand!”

Because the other part of Jesus' first message not just “repent”, but “the kingdom of heaven is at hand”.
The other gospels translations talk about the kingdom of God,
but Matthew changes it to kingdom of heaven to avoid using the sacred name,
& that has caused people throughout the ages to think that the kingdom of heaven is about where we go when we die.
But that was never Jesus's prime concern; Jesus was all about living in the present moment.
Jesus understood that with God, there is no time or place –
because time and space are confined to our physical, material world.
The kingdom of God does not exist in a different time like after we die,
and it doesn't exist in some other place like up there or out there in “heaven”.
The kingdom of God exists, not in a different time or place, but in a different realm –
a non-physical, non-material realm, a spiritual realm – that interacts with the physical realm.

Not even after I learned that the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God
was not simply about what happens after we die,
I still didn't grasp the fact that it was happening in a different realm.
I thought that the kingdom of God could be seen in the things that we can see around us that are good –
like when a hungry person is fed, or a thirsty person is given water, or when a relationship is healed.
Now don't get me wrong – those good, loving, generous things that we see happening around us
can certainly be reflections of the kingdom of God, or the effects of the kingdom of God,
but the kingdom of God is not those things.
The kingdom of God is not what we do, no matter how good or loving or generous.
The kingdom of God is what GOD does – in us, and for us, and around us.

Jesus started his ministry by proclaiming the kingdom of God and that's what his parables are so often about. Jesus came preaching the same words as John, but with an entirely different understanding. For John, the words really did come across as something strange and scary and threatening. But when Jesus talked about the kingdom, he was talking about something surprising and amazing and filled with joy!

Today we have four such parables.

At Pastor Hoffman's Bible study this week, he suggested that maybe Jesus didn't preach these all at the same time but used one on one day and another on another day and so on.

But that left me wondering then what else he said after he told a parable in 1 or 2 sentences?

But then I read a sermon where one preacher said that what Jesus was doing was like a stand-up comedian who just offers one joke after another – Boom! Boom! Boom! == and he said that's what would Jesus was doing.

The kingdom of heaven is like this amazing thing! And like this amazing thing!

And this amazing thing! – Boom! Boom! Boom! – one fantastic image after another,

one surprising image after another, one mind blowing image after another – in a kaleidoscope of joy!

“The kingdom...is like a mustard seed” – a teeny tiny seed that grows in the huge bush or tree that offers shade and a home to birds in a hot, dry land.

Yes, a human being plants the seed, but the miracle isn't in the planting, the kingdom of God isn't in the planting.

The kingdom, the miracle, is in the process of growth as God designed it & causes it to happen – from the tiny seed comes something big and unexpected,

something that has purpose and value, offering safety and comfort and peace.

The kingdom is what God does when he takes the tiniest thing & works a wondrous miracle!

Think about one of the most important blessings you have in your life, perhaps the most important achievement or the most important person and trace that situation or that relationship back to where it began....

I am remembering a story that I heard about 2 people meeting at a coffee pot

in the lounge right here at Salem, and oh my goodness, what came out of that meeting, out of that tiny seed!

The kingdom of God isn't that the bush with a tree is offering shade to the birds.

That's just the result of the kingdom.

That's simply an effect of the kingdom.

That's merely a reflection of the kingdom.

The kingdom is what GOD did, leading two people to meet at a coffee pot

and then in everything that God has done in that relationship since that first meeting.

The kingdom is like a tiny bit of leaven-which in that culture of unleavened bread was considered a kind of poison—that a woman hides in a monstrous amount of flour.

And when the flour is mixed with water, and before anyone realizes it or can stop it, a chemical reaction occurs, and the bread starts to rise.

In some ways, this parable is similar to the mustard seed because it's about something tiny coming into something big.

But in this case, it's even more mysterious.

It's not just about the natural process of growth but it's about a chemical reaction that can't be stopped.

Again the kingdom is not the bread its self.

The bread is simply a reflection, or a result, or an effect of the kingdom.

The kingdom is that transformation, that conversion, that reformation, that chemical reaction that happens when a person's life is completely and irrevocably changed.

Think about your own life

and how God has changed you and led you towards the plan and purpose God has for your life.

If I look back on my life I think back to that 1st question, “What do you want to be when you grow up?”
when I knew without a shadow of a doubt, with absolutely no hesitation,
that I wanted to be a minister just like my dad.

I had never thought about that before so it was a completely spontaneous answer.

If I look at it in light of this parable,

that was the moment that God, the old woman, hid the leaven in the flour of my life.

Nothing happened for years because I couldn't be a pastor – I was a girl –

but then at seminary when a professor said,

“Wait! But your church ordains women now, so why aren't you?”

and that was the moment that God, the old woman, added water to that flour with the yeast,

and the chemical reaction, the transformation began.

It's not the fact that I'm a pastor now that is the kingdom of God,

but it is God working in my life from the hiding of the leaven,

to the adding of the water, to the baking of the bread, to its serving, and to its eating,

that was the Kingdom of God.

The kingdom is like a treasure that's been hidden in the field, and someone stumbles over it,

and recognizing what it is, they give up everything that they have in order to get that treasure!

The kingdom of God's is like a jewel merchant on the hunt for exquisite pearls.

Finding one that is flawless, he immediately sells everything and buys it.

In the 1st of these 2 parables, the kingdom is discovered by accident

and in the 2nd, someone is searching for it, but whether one is looking or one just happens to find it,

the point is that it is so beautiful, so captivating, so priceless,

that there's nothing in the world that you wouldn't give up to possess it.

I know there may be people who think that I'm nuts because I believe in God

and not just a theoretical God, but God who is active in my daily life, a God who answers prayers,

a God who speaks to me in words & visions & dreams, and who shows up in signs & wonders & miracles.

Sometimes following that God, or witnessing to that God comes at a cost.

Sometimes I risk ridicule, sometimes it rips apart relationships,

sometimes it causes me to take a stand that puts my job or reputation or livelihood on the line.

I'm not sure what would happen if I lived in a place where Christianity was illegal and I was asked to deny my faith.

I'm not sure that I would have the courage to stand up then.

But I do know that ever since God transformed my heart and my mind and my spirit

in a way that allows me to experience how God works in his kingdom,

that has become worth more than anything else in my life.

There's nothing else that can ever come close to providing such meaning and purpose and excitement and joy.

Jesus may have spoken bluntly, maybe even harshly, to the scribes and Pharisees,

to those who were not open to being transformed,

who were not open to anything but a material physical caterpillar, kind of life.

But Jesus' main message, “Repent! for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”

is not the negative or burdensome or scary message we might have been taught or others may still teach.

Jesus's message was, “Be transformed! so your eyes and ears and minds and hearts can be open

to a God who speaks and acts in ways that we can hear and see every day!”

“Be transformed from your life as a caterpillar to life as a butterfly!”

That doesn't mean that there will never again be obstacles or challenges or sorrows in your life,

but what it does mean is that despite & within & thru out the obstacles & challenges & sorrows,

you can see and hear God at work and experience

the surprising joy of a tiny seed growing into something huge,

the surprising joy of something hidden away completely changing the expected outcome,

and the surprising joy of finding the most amazing treasure you could ever have imagined

Be transformed, so you can step into the kingdom of magic, mystery, and miracles,

where the greatest treasures on earth can be found –

treasures of peace and love and hope and joy, just waiting for you. Amen