

The Kingdom of Heaven

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[0 : 00] And I just want to welcome you. My name is Hilary Van Wagenen. I'm one of the pastors here at Church of the Advent. And I'm so, so glad you're here this morning. And I would love to meet you if we haven't met. I'll be downstairs after the service.

There will be coffee. And I just want to invite all of you to come downstairs and have more time to just get to know one another and connect. But welcome. So this passage this morning, there's this language of kingdom of heaven.

And I think our idea of kings and kingdoms is really different from the vision we see in today's gospel reading. I think generally Americans tend to react pretty strongly when we hear the words king and kingdom.

As my dear British friend likes to say, you all are celebrating the 250th anniversary of your rebellion this summer. Meanwhile, I'm like, we're celebrating our independence. What are you talking about? But just think about the recent no kings protests we've been seeing over the past several months throughout the country. And whatever side you're on politically, I think these protests reveal something that goes pretty deep in the American psyche.

[1 : 07] We tend to be individualists. And we get a little bit twitchy when we think of a king or kingdom being part of a kingdom. And again, whoever you voted for, I'm willing to bet this might resonate with you.

But here's the thing. For Matthew's audience, living under oppressive Roman rule, the idea of kings and kingdoms was really different. They would have heard this differently. The idea of being able to live in a different kingdom, of being delivered from their current oppression, of having a good king to rule them, this was incredibly good news to them.

And this morning, we're going to talk about why this is good news for us too. In a city like Washington, D.C. in 2026. And we'll unpack this concept by answering two questions. What does the kingdom of heaven look like? And what does it mean to live in the kingdom of heaven? Would you pray with me? Lord, thank you for this invitation this morning by your word. We thank you for your word. Would you speak through it to us? Would you teach us this morning? Would you be with us, Holy Spirit, to illuminate what you want us to learn?

[2 : 27] Encourage us. Convict us. Thank you for your presence, Lord. We just welcome more and more of you. And we pray these things in the mighty name of Jesus and under his authority.

Amen. So first of all, what does the kingdom of heaven look like? This is kind of an abstract concept, right? So first, just a brief definition.

This phrase, kingdom of heaven, is what Matthew uses to mean the establishment of Jesus' authority and rule throughout the cosmos. John Wimber, founder of the Vineyard Movement of Churches, defines it this way.

Jesus is the reign of God to come to claim what is rightfully his. Let me say that again. Jesus is the reign of God come to claim what is rightfully his.

So this means coming under the authority and rule of a good king. A king who loves us. A king who is for us. King Jesus.

[3 : 25] And how do we know he's good? Why do we need a good king? I think the answer starts with this phrase in verse 36.

He had compassion on them. Matthew writes, So sheep without a shepherd might not mean a ton to us because we don't live in an agrarian society.

But it's enough to say that when sheep don't have a shepherd, they are a mess. They serve themselves. The results mean disaster. But before we get too condescending towards sheep, let's just think about our society.

Whether we acknowledge it or not, we all follow something. And there's a whole online industry built on this. A world full of influencers who tell you they're the ones who really get it.

So just as an example, let's take the concept of looks maxing. Have you guys heard of this? Looks maxing? The looks maxing scale is a tiered rating system used within online self-improvement and manosphere.

[4 : 37] Sorry, I can't say that word without lying. Manosphere communities to rank facial attractiveness. Often employing the PSL.

PSL is short for perceived sexual levels. And this is a 1 to 10 metric. So 1 is the lowest and 10 is the highest. 10 is quote unquote sort of, you know, the way they define it is the God tier.

Blessed with perfect facial structure and the golden ratio. I'm just saying this is what it said on Google when I Googled it. And there are all these YouTube influencers who are having surgery to adjust their facial structure to get closer to a 10.

They're banging themselves in the face with hammers to try to like rearrange their cheekbones. And there are these AI tools to rate yourself. Like what number am I? So you know how you need to improve.

So who's the authority here? AI? The internet? The algorithm? Sheep without a shepherd? And maybe you hear this and you say, ah, kids these days.

[5 : 48] And yeah, that is extreme. But what are all of us blind to? What are we serving? Maybe we're working ourselves to death to try to get that promotion.

We're sacrificing our families and our health to make more money. Maybe we're slamming a friend behind their back to try to impress someone, to try to get a laugh.

Maybe we drink too much. Maybe we eat too much. Maybe we shop too much. Or maybe we're really self-righteous and condescending because we don't do those other things. And the point is, this is what happens when the wrong thing has authority in our life.

This is what being harassed and helpless looks like. Harassed by what? Harassed our own sin by the world, the devil. And helpless to do what?

To save ourselves. We need a rescue. We need a shepherd. And into this, Jesus steps. He steps into these messy crowds of harassed and helpless people.

[6 : 52] In bondage to brokenness, sin, and trauma. And he has compassion. He steps into our messes. And he says, I am the good shepherd. The Greek word for compassion there means he was moved in the depth of his being.

He felt it in his soul. He aches at our plight. And I want you to note the order here. Jesus has compassion while we're stuck in our harassed and helpless state.

I think a lot of us assume that Jesus is kind of annoyed and angry with us. Kind of like, oh, you messed up again. You made the same mistake again.

You're still doing that. You're still having issues. But that's not the picture of Jesus we see in Matthew or throughout the Gospels. Guys, he has compassion on you and loves you before you realize you're a workaholic.

He has compassion on you and loves you while you're exploding in anger at someone. He has compassion on you and loves you when you wake up in the morning with a hangover because you drank too much. And whatever the thing is that you're most ashamed of, or the thing you may not even fully be aware that's harming you, Jesus sees it fully.

[8 : 09] And he aches with compassion for you. And out of that depth of compassion, he goes to work, teaching, proclaiming the Gospel, reversing the brokenness of the world.

And sometimes we joke about the message translation of the Bible because it has kind of quirky paraphrasing, but I really like the way Eugene Peterson phrases this here. He writes, So not just physical healing, but healing of the whole person.

John Wimber again calls Jesus' ministry power wrapped in love. Isn't that beautiful? Power wrapped in love. And his approach to ministry, this power wrapped in love, boils down to three things.

He's proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven starts here and now. The Jews thought that the Messiah's entry point and establishment of the kingdom of heaven was synonymous with the end of the world.

But Matthew's clarifying that here. These healings and these deliverances function as foreshadowing of the promise of the coming kingdom and redemption. And in fact, throughout the Gospels and the book of Acts, we always see these things working in tandem with one another.

[9 : 33] Teaching and proclaiming with no accompanying physical signs, physical reality, that would just be empty words. Healings with no preaching and instruction wouldn't have the same meaning.

Healing in the name of what and why? And ultimately, Jesus uses healing and deliverance to connect us to himself as the good shepherd.

The things themselves, these physical signs, aren't the point. They're symptoms of the greater reality that Jesus came to bring restoration and wholeness.

And third, Jesus ministers to the whole person. Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus both healing and forgiving sins in the same episode, in the same act, showing that physical brokenness and spiritual darkness are one and the same.

And I think in our modern era, this is a little bit of a hard concept to grasp. We tend to kind of separate out like our intellect, our spirit, our emotions, our bodies. But that's not what we see in Scripture.

[10 : 39] In Scripture, we see a holistic, fully integrated approach to healing. One that starts in the present age, starts now, started with Jesus' incarnation, and will be brought to completion in the age to come.

So the kingdom of heaven is one ruled by a good king. One in which we can expect to see the effects of sin and evil reversed and brokenness healed in societies and for individuals.

Not only in the future, but in the present. And we see this all throughout the Bible, right? When we're restored to right relationship with God, we flourish. So once that restoration happens, what does it mean to live in the kingdom of heaven?

Well, number one, it means we get to work alongside Jesus. When we come to this verse where Jesus says, The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.

That's what he's setting up here. And the region where Jesus ministered was pretty small. It was about the size of New Jersey. But still, there were more needs than he could meet himself, right?

[11 : 53] Because remember, when Jesus took on humanity, he took on its limits. And so when Jesus is saying, Pray earnestly for workers for the harvest, I feel like this is one of those asides in the Gospels.

He's kind of trying to get the disciples to clue in. He's like, Where will we find these workers? We should pray for them. And how many of us decide something is impossible before we pray?

That co-worker would never listen to me share the gospel. They hate Christianity. Or this reconciliation with this person is impossible. There's no way. Or this person's illness is going to debilitate them for the rest of their life.

There's no way that it will be healed. And we immediately slam the door on something that God might want to do. But Jesus doesn't do that. He moves to prayer.

And not just by himself, but he invites his companions into prayer. He doesn't despair. He doesn't despair. He doesn't grieve. He looks at them and asks them to pray.

[12 : 59] And the fruit of that prayer is participation. So the first workers for the harvest are the disciples, the twelve.

And they're sent to the lost sheep of Israel. Now why is that? Because Jesus came to fulfill the law and the prophets. So first the disciples are sent to the lost sheep of Israel. But very quickly in Matthew 28, we see Jesus extending this call and commission to the whole world.

And it's noteworthy that Jesus summons his disciples and he gives them authority. And even in this he models. He says in John 5, I can only do what I see my father doing.

The call is the same for his disciples. This question of kingdom authority really matters. Remember John Wimber's quote, Jesus is the reign of God. Come to claim what is rightfully his.

And this language of kingdom and kingship is all over the Bible. Think about what Paul writes in Colossians. He has rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved son.

[14 : 10] And these spiritual kingdoms are real. They're not just metaphorical. There's no middle kingdom. It's the kingdom of light or the kingdom of darkness. And you can't have a foot in both.

So the question is, does Jesus' transference of authority to his disciples apply to us too? Absolutely. When you have the Holy Spirit, Jesus' power and authority are at work in you.

In fact, Jesus says in John 14, whoever believes in me will do greater works than I do. Because I am going to the Father. Because Jesus equips and empowers the church, his gospel can spread

throughout the whole earth.

So there are five implications I want to draw out about working alongside Jesus. The first is this. We have nothing except what we've been given.

And everything we do flows from the imitation of Jesus Christ. The initiative rests entirely with Jesus. He makes the decisions. He issues the call.

[15:19] So let's just think for a minute about what Matthew doesn't say. When he lists the disciples, he doesn't say, and then Peter was chosen because Peter was super eloquent and educated.

And then Matthew was chosen because he was really intelligent. No, he doesn't list any of that stuff. He doesn't talk about credentials or CVs. Why? Because there aren't any.

The guys were totally unworthy in the eyes of the world. And we're unworthy too, but it doesn't matter. Because we have the Lord Jesus.

We have the Holy Spirit. What matters is Jesus' will. And so we have this. And secondly, that means we have to be in a posture of complete dependence.

And that's the meaning of these directions towards the end of the passage we read about just take one cloak. Don't take any money. Because we've been given so abundantly. Then freely we give too, right?

[16:18] So friends, we need to actually pray. We need to ask the Lord to place us in situations and places where we have no choice but to rely on him. Because that is when his glory and power are displayed most fully.

I mean, it's a scary prayer to pray, right? But what would it mean if we started to pray that as a church? We need to learn to listen to him and follow him, even in situations that seem impossible or unlikely.

Third, we're responsible for how we proclaim the gospel, but we're not responsible for whether someone receives it.

That responsibility rests with the Lord. Remember, we're called to speak and act with power wrapped in love. And number four, have you ever considered that you might be the answer to someone's prayer?

Have you considered that those of us sitting in this room are the answers to the prayer Jesus asked his followers to pray? That we're stepping into that cloud of witnesses as workers for the harvest field?

[17:32] That those prayers prayed two millennia ago are still being answered? Revelation 5 gives us this awesome image of golden bowls of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

Isn't that amazing? Every prayer prayed throughout history is recorded in heaven. It's collected in the throne room of God. How would you live and work and pray if you believed that?

Your prayers matter. And number five, in joining Jesus in his work, the disciples and we are joining him in this task of shepherding and writing the places where sin and death and decay have held sway.

So what does that mean? Well, it means every kind of restoration. It means that proclaiming the kingdom is linked to wholeness. That through us, Jesus can bring wholeness to people's bodies and minds that have been marred by illness in the fall.

It means that death is not the final word. It means that through us, people who are outcasts, who are untouchable and marginalized, can be invited in to family and community.

[18:47] And it means that by the authority of Jesus, we can drive out demons. Satan has no authority compared to that of the Lord Jesus Christ. St. Paul writes that every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

And that includes the demonic. In fact, we see in the gospels that demons always know who Jesus is. And they're terrified of him. And they should be. Because his authority and greatness are so far above any other power throughout the universe.

And I think it's a reasonable question as we're talking about this. If these things are true, then why is my life and why is the world still broken?

Another John Wimber analogy I find helpful is D-Day. So when the allies stormed the beaches at D-Day, that assured victory in World War II. But there was still another 11 months of fighting before victory was finally declared, before the war was over.

Jesus' incarnation, his death, and his resurrection were D-Day. Jesus established the kingdom of heaven and broke the power of death and hell and Satan.

[20 : 10] Satan is a defeated foe, just like Nazi Germany. But right now, we're still in that in-between time. And that means we still have to contend with the world, the flesh, the devil, with brokenness.

That means we still suffer pain and loss. And even those who are miraculously healed in the present day, people who are miraculously healed in Jesus' time, will one day grow old and die. Think about Lazarus. Lazarus was raised from the dead. Jesus works this incredibly powerful resurrection of Lazarus. But he got old and died a second time, right?

But that's not the final word. Because Jesus conquered death on the cross, and one day, we will stand in that heavenly city that he has prepared for us, finally and fully healed, alive forever. And we will see him face to face. But until that day, this passage shows us that we can live with hope.

[21 : 18] Friends, we are all called to share the gospel. We're all called to pray for healing. Because we're all called to image Christ to a hurting and broken world.

And because Jesus has established his kingdom, we can expect that he will work. So we pray in the name of Jesus and with his authority for healing and wholeness in our lives, and the lives of our friends and family, of our neighbors.

We pray for healing and wholeness in our neighborhood, for healing and wholeness in our city, in our nation, in the world. Francis McNutt, one of my favorite prayer and deliverance teachers, used to like to quote Wayne Gretzky, hockey legend, when he talked about whether we should pray for healing.

He used to say, you miss 100% of shots you don't take. It's true. So speaking of taking shots, was anybody watching the NBA finals?

Yes, thank you. I see some hands. I appreciate that. So you might have seen the fourth game when there were just a few seconds on the clock, the Knicks were down, and Jalen Brunson takes the ball all the way up.

[22 : 33] He shoots a three, and it bounces out, right? But then out of nowhere, his teammate, O.G. Ananobi, comes in and tips the ball in, and the Knicks win.

It was awesome, right? And we've heard people tossing this around. The Knicks are a team of destiny. Look how they've come from behind. Look how they've won.

You know who else is a team of destiny? The Holy Church of the Lord Jesus Christ is a team of destiny. It's true. Amen. And if we see an opening, Jesus is asking us to take the shot.

But you're not taking it by yourself. You've got teammates surrounding you. As Pastor Thomas often says, the church is God's plan A for the world. And there is no plan B.

This is what being part of the kingdom of heaven means. So in closing, we're going to do something a little bit different this morning. I want to go ahead and invite our prayer ministers to come forward to the front and our worship team.

[23 : 37] And we're going to have an extended time of prayer. And our worship team is going to play music. And we're going to have some prompts on the screen. And you're welcome to sit with these prompts.

You're welcome to whatever the Lord is stirring up in you. You're welcome to pray. You can come forward to receive prayer. You can pray at your seat. But consider what God is saying both to us as individuals and to us as a church.

And then after about 15 or 20 minutes, I'll come up and we'll close this time with a confession. So would you join together in prayer with me?

Come Holy Spirit. We welcome you. Come Holy Spirit. Come Holy Spirit.