

“The Coming of the Kingdom”  
Luke 23:27-43

November 24, 2019  
Church Year

Last Sunday of the

I remember one Easter Sunday when our family lived in Wisconsin. After a joyful celebration of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, I was just making the sign of the cross while giving the benediction. As I did that, I looked to the back of the church and saw a woman and her husband just coming in the back door. Afterwards, I found out that they had forgotten to set their clocks ahead for the spring time change. They had, in effect, slept through Easter.

You may have that same feeling here today. You came to church, thinking that we were getting ready to begin Advent. Now, after hearing the Gospel reading for today, you may feel like you slept through, not only Advent, but through Christmas, Epiphany, and all of Lent only to arrive at church and find that we must be celebrating Good Friday instead of the Last Sunday of the Church Year. That is a holiday in the church calendar which is supposed to celebrate the coming of the kingdom of God, yet we are reading about Jesus on the cross. What gives?

The problem here is not a messed up calendar, but a messed up understanding of the kingdom of God. Normally, in stories about a kingdom, we focus on the power and the might of the king who rules the kingdom. A strong king leads his forces into battle with the support and approval of his subjects. A successful king will defeat his enemies and put them to death while, at the same time, rewarding his friends and giving them good things.

The king himself is strong and forceful. He rules his kingdom from a throne of gold and lives in luxury. He maintains his kingdom as long as he can until a newer and stronger king defeats him. When a new king assumes power, the whole process starts all over again. This can happen often as royal dynasties come and go.

This pretty much describes the kind of king that the Jews were looking for in the Messiah. It may also describe how we think God should act in our day & age. We expect a God who exhibits power and strength. We want a God who can defeat our enemies – all the sickness, sorrow, and suffering which this world has – and reward us, His friends, by giving us good things, making us happy, and doing our will. There should be a lot more glitz and glamour, bells and whistles, excitement and celebration when such a kingdom comes.

But the kingdom of God comes in a very different way as our Gospel lesson for today indicates. Jesus is charged, condemned, and sentenced for being a king. The Jewish leaders that religious charges against Jesus (His teaching or His claim to be the Son of God) would not get them the execution they desired from Pilate. So, they ask Pilate to condemn Jesus for His claim that He was the king of the Jews. Ironically, that is exactly what He is.

However, He comes as a far different king than any other king who has ever lived. He was born in a peasant family in a small village. He had no wealth or

possessions befitting a king. In fact, this king is weak, having been whipped and beaten and soon to be crucified and executed on a cross.

Although He admits to having a kingdom, it is a different kingdom from any that ever existed. When Pilate asked him, "Are you a king?", He responded, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world." (John 18:36). His kingdom is without an army to physically fight and gain military victories over enemies. Jesus is the king who goes it alone. His own subjects mock Him and reject Him.

He acts differently than any other king as well. Instead of rewarding His so-called friends like any king would do, Jesus corrects and mildly rebukes those women crying because He is going the way of the cross. He says, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children." Things are going to get mighty rough for those expecting a physical kingdom.

Even more strange, King Jesus shows mercy to His enemies by offering forgiveness and eternal life to them. While hanging from the cross, Jesus pleads for forgiveness for those who put Him there, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And to a repentant thief, Jesus promises, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

This King reigns from the throne of the cross with a crown made of thorns. He does not take His enemies lives for the injustices and rebellion they have done against Him. Rather, He offers up His own life on the altar of the cross as payment for their sin. In our Old Testament lesson, Malachi shows how the Lord treats those who rebel and repent: "They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him." Jesus served His Heavenly Father well. However, instead of sparing His Son, He did just the opposite. He did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all."

It was on that cross, not on a military battlefield, where the Kingdom of God came. It came by the death of the king, not by His long life. The repentant thief asked, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," thinking it was a long time in the future. However, Jesus replies, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." On that day, the kingdom of God was established through the forgiveness of sin by the sacrifice of the king. Paradise, which had been closed by sin, is now reopened to all who believe. And eternal life is won by the death of the Son of God and ratified by His resurrection from the grave three short days later.

People today who are looking for God do so in a way like many people look for a king. We expect more "bells and whistles" when it comes to talking about God and His kingdom. We look for power and might. We desire signs and miracles. We expect answers to our prayers which are according to our will and our timetable. We want a God who can provide us with our best life now. And when we don't find these things, we weep like the women following Jesus to the cross, sad and disappointed.

The kingdom of God still comes to us today in a subtle and hidden form like it did on that first Good Friday. Jesus comes to you and me, not in might and miracles, but in weakness and His Word. You become a member of the family of God, not by a show

of strength, but by receiving something weak. The waters of Holy Baptism give you a whole new birth through the washing away of your sin, the giving of the Holy Spirit, and the imparting of a new life. You are sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father.

Not only has your identity changed, but your location has changed as well. St. Paul writes in our epistle reading for today, “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transformed us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Colossians 1:13-20) You remain His holy child and in His holy kingdom, not by doing good things to impress God, but by receiving the good things God has for you in His Word: the forgiveness of sins in its many forms. You receive it in the Absolution, in the reading of the Holy Scriptures, and in the preaching of that Word.

You receive the ability to live the new life given you in Holy Baptism by returning to your Baptism. The invocation, the benediction, and the placement of the baptismal font front and center are all ways in which we remember who we are in our union with Christ Jesus. As we were baptized into Christ’s death for the forgiveness of all of our sins, we have also been baptized into Christ’s resurrection, so that, as the Scriptures say, “just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:4)

You are nourished and strengthened to live as members in the kingdom of God, not as a special guest at a state dinner hosted by Jesus, sitting on a throne of gold, but as a regular kingdom member at the royal table where Jesus is present as the host of the feast and as the feast itself – His true body and true blood with the bread and the wine for the strengthening of your faith and life through the forgiveness of all of your sins.

We commemorate this day in the church calendar, not for the coming of the kingdom of God which happened at the cross, but for the revealing of the kingdom of God, which has always been here, when Christ returns in glory. In doing so, remember three things.

First, look for the right kingdom to come. The problem for the people at Jesus’ time was not that they were looking for the kingdom of God to come, but they were looking for the wrong kind of the kingdom, as are many people today.

Second, look for the right way for the kingdom of God to come. The people of Jesus’ time envisioned kingdoms that had military power, earthly wealth, and a tenuous existence which may or may not last. The kingdom of God comes in weakness, by means of words, water, wine & bread. The kingdom of God comes to bring spiritual wealth – forgiveness, peace with God, a new life here and the guarantee of life in a kingdom that will endure for ever and ever.

Third, prepare yourself for that return. Make use of the Word of God and the power of the Holy Spirit so that you might be watchful in the coming days, weeks, months, and years; discerning of all doctrines, philosophies, actions, of the present age; and rejoicing in what is right, and not being deceived by what is wrong, even though it looks very good.

In the book, *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, Ebenezer Scrooge is given a chance to reflect on the failures of his past, to see clearly his failures in the present,

and to be warned of what tragedy his future would bring to the visit of three spirits. Although he wasn't interested in the visitation of these three spirits – Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Yet To Come – the visitations made him a changed man and he delights in the fact that they did it all in just one night. He had not missed out on Christmas Day. He still had time to change.

Every year, as we begin in Advent and journey through Christmas, Lent, Good Friday, and Easter, we may not like the journey, especially in its sad or unexciting times. However, we rejoice that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we have been changed and brought to faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. We are delighted to know, as we read the story of the crucifixion on the days leading up to Christmas, that we have not missed the coming of the kingdom of God. By that same Holy Spirit working through the Word of God, we have time to change our understanding of the kingdom of God, to prepare for the revealing of the kingdom of God, and to enjoy the kingdom of God forever. Amen.