

IT'S CLOSER THAN YOU THINK

Sunday, March 1, 2009
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Have you read our blog? Did you know we had a blog? We do! If you go on the Internet and you go to www.fccbc.org, that's our church's web site and there you will find a blog. Tom and I are writing our reflections on our "Forty Days with Jesus" series there everyday during Lent. And what's cool about that then is you can click on and you can comment and then we get into this big online discussion. It's really cool, there are people who have done that. So I was reading our blog the other day and noticed that somebody raised the concern about the passage for today, and I thought if that person has this concern then maybe some of you also have that anxiety. I wanted to address that before we got started today.

The person said something like this. "While I understand that the kingdom of God is talking about something that happens here on earth, it makes me a little worried that that means maybe we don't believe in heaven." That's not true.

I want to put those anxieties to rest now. That surely the God who gifted us with life in the beginning can be trusted to enlarge our lives in the end. This is true. We don't have to worry about what happens when we die—we will be with God. And since that's true, we can start to focus on what Jesus was really trying to get our attention about anyway, which is *the Kingdom of God is near*. It is so near to us, that it is here among us right now, if we would just open our eyes and see that it is so.

That's what we will be exploring today, so if you would, please, let's turn our hearts and minds toward God in prayer.

Oh God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be found acceptable in your sight, for you are our rock and our redeemer. Amen

Like I said, I can't help but think that maybe we've got this Kingdom of God stuff all wrong. It's not like Jesus said that the Kingdom of God is like a place where, ah, um, where, (singing) "where troubles melt like lemon drops, away up above the chimney tops, that's where you'll find me. Somewhere over the rainbow" is not what He was talking about when He was talking about the Kingdom of God. It's not! It's not! But, none the less, here we are, like Dorothy, hoping, praying and wishing that there is someplace like that. And, also, hoping, praying, wishing and suspecting that that place can't be here. It just can't be *here*. But that's not what the text says.

Pay attention to the text. In the text we see John the Baptist out in the wilderness screaming his head off, trying to get our attention. "Repent, repent for the Kingdom of God has come near." Stop looking for it over the rainbow. Stop acting like it's never going to happen. It's NEAR to you. He comes to us, much like a camel-hair clad

“Glinda the Good Witch” and says, “You’ve had the power to possess the Kingdom of God all along—all along.”

If we pay attention to the text, we see that the Kingdom of God is near—all we have to do is turn around. Turn around. That’s what repent means: turn around. It’s that simple. But is it really simple after all? It’s a little shocking to me—it’s little stunning to hear that the Kingdom of God is so near. I’ve become a little bit like Dorothy. You remember that scene where Glenda comes to her and says “You’ve had the power to possess it all along”? Dorothy gets a little wide-eyed. *What? Really? You mean I didn’t have to go through all of this; I could have been at home all along?*

Dorothy just had to click her heels together, but we have to turn on ours. Again, to repent simply means to turn around. Turn around for the Kingdom of God is near. John Dominique Crossan, one of our contemporary theologians, talks about the Kingdom of God, not in terms of a place, because then it’s too easy for us to confuse it with the life after this life. Instead, he talks about the Kingdom of God as a program. The Kingdom of God is like a program which God is enacting here in our midst. It’s like a program that we are invited to participate in. So then we may ask, well, what is required for us to participate in the Kingdom of God? What is required of us? The prophet Micah asked the same question—“What does the Lord require of you? What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice and love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?”

And so, if we have requirements for participating in the Kingdom of God, then it may go something like this. In order to see that the Kingdom of God is in our midst, we have to turn from injustice and turn back toward justice. We have to turn away from perpetuating injustice in our world. We have to turn away from the structures that we have created that suppress the poor. We have to turn away from our biases. We have to turn away from taking advantage of people. We have to turn away from these things and turn toward justice. And then, then, we see that the Kingdom is near us. It’s NEAR.

We hear the prophet say that we have to love kindness. So this means we have to turn away from being crabby, sour people. You may laugh, but I know people who think that all Christians are mean because we are judgmental. We have to turn away from being judgmental. We have to turn away from being ill-tempered. We have to turn away from being stingy and, instead, turn towards kindness and generosity, open and welcoming lives. And then, then we see that the Kingdom is near. It’s NEAR.

We hear the prophet saying that we have to walk humbly with God. We have to turn away from thinking that we can do it on our own and turn back toward walking humbly with God. We have to turn away from putting *our* priorities first, and turn towards putting God’s priorities first. We have to turn away from our cowboy-lone-ranger, brave-little-soldier, pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps kind of mentality, and turn back toward the God that says, “If you *trust* me, I will lead you.” “If you follow me, I will lead you where you need to go.” And when we turn away from those things and turn back toward following God, then we see that the Kingdom of God is near. It is so NEAR to us.

There's something that happens when we do this kind of turning: our perspective changes, quite literally. When the kids were standing here and they turned around, they weren't looking at the windows anymore, they were looking back at the cross. Our perspective will change. When Dorothy landed at home, it's not like home was that much different from what it had been --it's that her perspective had changed. For that matter, Oz wasn't that far away, either. The Lion and the Tin Man and the Scarecrow were all still there. They were just the farm hands. They had been her friends all along. But her perspective had changed and she was able to see them, now, for who they really were. So you are invited during this Lenten season to turn around and see the world for the way that God has dreamed it all along. Turn around.

I want to challenge each of you to think of ways that you can do that in your life, ways that you can turn your life around, back toward God. And to do so, if you have figured out ways of doing that, then I would invite you to find your own metaphorical pair of ruby red slippers. [*Leah takes a pair of red high heeled shoes out of a paper bag.*] And to bring them to the cross, [*Leah places the shoes under the cross*] to find a place for you to be at home at the foot of the cross, so that you can see that the Kingdom of God is near. Because, after all, there's no place like home.

Amen.