

Jesus Is King

“Jesus Is King NOW”

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Digging Deeper

Jesus Is King: Jesus Is King NOW

Written by: Robert Ismon Brown (bbrown@clnaz.org)

Pastor for Care and Senior Ministries, Chicago First Church of the Nazarene

Background Notes

Key Scripture Text(s): Isaiah 43:16-19, John 3:3, Mark 10:15, Matthew 10:7, Matthew 3:2, Matthew 4:17, Luke 17:20-21, Matthew 22:1-14

Introduction

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ... Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." ¹⁶ As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea-- for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰ Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him. (Mark 1:1, 14-20; also, Matthew 3:2; 4:17).

According to the very first gospel, something new was beginning to happen in the world, and this new thing was the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This new thing was good news, the gospel. It involved Jesus coming to the human place announcing a message that drew in human beings to a project that had ancient roots but had *now* been given a fresh start in the world. What Jesus said sounded familiar to his audience because their history already was full of stories about *God coming* to their ancestors and also *bringing good news* to them. These ancestors were the people called Israel whose history included precedent-setting events involving leading characters in the great drama of God's story for the human race. Abraham hears the Lord's call and leaves his homeland on a new journey to a new land. After him there came Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve ancestors. Eventually they would number into the thousands, poised to make a new beginning as not only a family but also a nation. This ancient project, filled with *newness*, was painful at times, marked by slavery in Egypt, life in the wilderness, until finally Canaan became their new home. New faces appear in this old, old story: Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, and the royal descendents who ruled this new-born nation.

When kings ruled Israel, the people thought of them as God's right-hand men: His "sons" who inherited the blessings on behalf of the whole nation. They were the visible expression of something Jews came to recognize as "the kingdom of God" — not so much a *place* where God was localized, but rather *the active rule of God as King* over His chosen people Israel. God, starting with Abraham, had been establishing a colony of heaven on earth where generations of His people might be born, grow, live, and bear witness to the rest of the world that God is king, not only over Israel, but over the whole earth. And so while Israel had kings who followed the supreme King with all their hearts, God's kingdom was yet still alive and well in Israel and through Israel. However, the story of God's living kingdom that had begun with His much-loved servant David took a sharp turn into disarray through willful acts of sin and wicked deeds of death. Sin and death had human faces in the great empires which surrounded Israel. Two of them, Assyria (in 722 BCE) and Babylon (in 587 BCE) invaded the promised land of Israel, overthrew the kings, and brought the elite families into exile. Something had gone wrong with the kingdom of God because something had gone wrong with the people of God, leading to the Lord's fatherly discipline of His chosen people.

As painful as exile was for Israel, the Lord did not abandon His people forever, and He rescued a remnant of them from Babylon, overthrowing that empire, and giving them the favor of its successor, Persia. In time there was once more a nation back in the land, building up Jerusalem the capital after its destruction, restoring the Temple and priesthood, and with great difficulty putting the world back together for future generations of Jews.

And yet this restored people was a much diminished nation without complete independence from the empires around them, living more frugally and worshipping more humbly than had been the case in their celebrated past. The Jewish world had changed dramatically, and with it the forms of religious faith, practice, and hope. Although things were partially back in service for Israel, they had this gnawing feeling that God Yahweh, the Lord of their long covenant history, had not quite returned to His people, had not yet decided to bring back the former glory of His kingdom. This awareness was painful and despairing for a people who once knew the living presence of the Lord in their midst in fire and cloud, in king and nation. The *new* they *knew* wasn't exactly the *new* they had *known*.

As time passed, the reality of the absent kingdom grew more severe as Israel's enemies waged war against them politically, culturally, and militarily. Empires succeeded each other on the landscape of the Mediterranean: Persia, Greece, Egypt, Syria, and finally Rome. By the time Jesus of Nazareth "came to Galilee," the people called Israel lived on land divided by Rome into several provinces ruled over by puppet kings and Roman procurators. The only "kingdom" anyone knew had its imperial boot on their necks. Whatever leaders held authority over land (the Herods) or over the Temple (imperially appointed high priests) required the approval of the Empire before they did anything. Israel was an occupied nation governed by a foreign power. The kingdom of God was nowhere to be *seen* — *until now*. Until "Jesus came to Galilee" with a royal announcement that shattered the silence of God's absence with the good news *that God was back in town — with power!* "The time is fulfilled...the kingdom of God has come near..." What Israel had longed for since the twin exiles of 722 and 587 had *now* broken through and broken into time, ripping apart the ordinary order of things. Standing in their midst was Jesus, the bearer of good news about the kingdom of God. For all intents, *this Jesus was the living, human embodiment of the kingdom of God. To see Jesus was to see the kingdom coming with power.*

Such a shocking development begged a human response, and Jesus issues instructions for Israel to receive the newly arrived kingdom: "*Repent and believe in the good news.*" Or, perhaps in less religious language: "Change your mind and attitude about things in general and your life in particular, and trust me and the good news which I bring today." Mark's gospel immediately describes how Jesus encounters persons whom "he saw" and called to "follow" him — persons who thereby received a fresh new start on the life they had been living *until now*. The responses he got are portrayed as "immediate" as if the people involved were anxious for the change that was coming, were so very ready for the *new* to arrive *now*. And Jesus was persistent, in the language of Mark 1:19, "as he went a little *farther...*" — implying that his work would be forward-looking, incremental, while he patiently attracted more and more followers to join him. Together, Jesus and twelve men would form the advance guard of the restored kingdom people, the lead men for God's arrival and renewal of His kingdom in the world. They — the disciples of Jesus — picked up where ancient Israel had left off, back when the kingdom project had stalled, but now was jumped started by the announcement of Jesus about good *news* from God.

"Immediately" proves to be a favorite adverb for Mark when he recounts this history-shattering moment in Galilee. Urgency accompanies the telling of the story, and urgency shaped the three year ministry of Jesus. Urgency would also set the agenda for the followers of Jesus *after* his death and resurrection. When he ascended, Jesus took his place at the right hand of the Father, the first time since the loss of the kingdom to exile that a God-ordained human being once again occupied the throne of God's kingdom. In Jesus the risen one, the kingdom project had been renewed, and his followers — numbering in the millions around the world — are still in the vanguard for extending its blessings to every human being within their reach.

Throughout 2,000 years of Christian history, the church of our Lord has proclaimed: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." Jesus is Lord: Lord of his church; Lord of the world, Lord of all. And the Lord instructs his followers to pray this prayer along with him, containing the familiar words:

Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6:10).

What his followers had come to learn very early in their history is that kingdom business always includes earth business, life in the cosmos business, flesh and blood business. Their purpose — their calling — as evidenced in the Lord’s Prayer for them is to be the instruments for calling down the power and presence of the heavenly kingdom into the reality of earthly life within the world: “on earth as in heaven.” Earth needs the transformative power available from heaven; earth remains the God-rich creation where He continues to proclaim, “All that I have created here on earth is *good, very good!*” When Jesus ascended to heaven, he did not abandon earth, and the power of the prayer is the very real way God’s will in heaven is done on earth. *Prayer is the most political thing a Christian can do.* Those who pray the prayer in repentance and faith become the instruments of our Lord’s peace in a world fractured by hate, sin, and death. Through the mighty energy of the Holy Spirit’s power and presence, the royal proclamation of Jesus proceeds from the right hand of the Father into the needy places of earth, brought there by the faithful witness of the church which prays, serves, sacrifices, and seeks for the kingdom of God to come on earth as in heaven.

The prayer is daily offered so that the kingdom might always be “the kingdom here and now.” And so, let us pray ... “Our Father who is in heaven ... let your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.”

The planning graphs for our series arrange its key thoughts around the promise of God’s renewed kingdom seen in our times — times of slow and arduous recovery from the unsettling ravages of the recent plague called Covid-19. The battle against Covid-19 is kingdom work that begins with the prayer of our Lord, but must also continue in steadfast research, public policy, truthful national leadership, civic loyalty, concern for others, and social change. When the kingdom comes in the midst of the human struggle for peace and well-being, things must necessarily change. Kingdom living is transformational living which requires a fresh word from the Lord who sits at the Father’s right hand. It is an unsettling word, but also a restorative word, much like the word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah the prophet when the exiles of ancient Israel were changing their world:

“Now I have put my words in your mouth. ¹⁰ See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” (Jeremiah 1:9-10).

These are world-shattering and disruptive words that unmake the world *that has been* so that *a new world might take its place*. That’s the ground where you and I *now stand*. Ours is the “work of the word” for *plucking up, pulling down, destroying, and overthrowing*; ours is the “work of the word” for *building and planting*. Here are four words of *deconstruction* and two words of *reconstruction*. This word is, says the Lord to Jeremiah, “on your lips” placed there by the Lord of the Word, by the Lord who is the Word made flesh and living among us! And so:

1. We step into the Kingdom of God when we accept Christ as our Lord and Savior.
2. We live in the Kingdom of God when we live by the Spirit.
3. We experience the Kingdom of God when commit to being a disciple of Jesus.
4. We advance the Kingdom of God when we commit to discipling others.
5. We serve the Kingdom of God when we serve others.

The theme of our new series takes its main text from Isaiah 43 which contains this defining thesis:

¹⁸ Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. ¹⁹ I am about to do *a new thing; now it springs forth*, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. (Isaiah 43:18-19).

Here, in the wilderness of Covid-19, is a fresh word that dares to move us beyond the losses of the past, of “the former things,” and to redirect our attention to what is “about” to happen *now*, that arises as “a new thing,” perhaps a development without precedent and yet with purpose. When the wilderness soaks up the invasion of the rivers, life springs forth. Are we ready for the rivers of blessing for the wilderness we are in? Let’s now look at this main text within its context for insight.

The Way through the Desert (Isaiah 43:16-19)

¹⁶ Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, ¹⁷ who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: ¹⁸ Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. ¹⁹ I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. (Isaiah 43:16-19).

In the whole history of Israel, nothing surpasses the critical incident called the Exodus. While Isaiah's prophecy reaches beyond the wonders of liberation from Egyptian slavery, it must begin there. Ask a Jew "Who is your God?" and the immediate reply is "God is the One who raised Israel from Egypt." Contained in those words is the story of redemption, the mighty acts of Yahweh who heard the cries of His ancient people in their suffering and oppression under Pharaoh's lash and then responded with the ten plagues against the gods of the Egyptians. Israel's God came to the aid of His people who had fallen under the unjust enslavement to forced labor in the interests of Egypt's ruler. The Lord of His people refused to allow an illegal, covenant-violating seizure of Israel. These were Yahweh's people, not Pharaoh's, and yet the king of Egypt held them against their will and so they were held against His will. To this atrocity and covenant breach, Yahweh would not remain silent. He determined to take back what rightfully belonged to Him. Whereas the gods of Egypt sanctioned the decrees of Pharaoh, forcing unpaid labor on Israel, Yahweh chose to wage war against the gods and set His people free. The last battle in that war was the plague on the firstborn of the oppressors, described this way:

¹² "On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn-- both men and animals-- and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. ¹³ The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt (Exodus 12:12-13).

Pharaoh thought himself to be a god, and in this final judgment, his royal rule over Israel would be broken. The everlasting memory of that climactic event was kept alive in the celebration of the Passover.

What followed was the last shriek in defeat as Pharaoh's armies pursued the fleeing Israelites in the miracle of the Red Sea, when the waters parted by the word of God through Moses, and Yahweh became the emancipator for the newly liberated slaves. And so it is that Isaiah begins, "he made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters..." leaving the armies of Egypt to fall, "never to rise again, extinguished, and snuffed out like a wick." Until the moment that God speaks, there was no way through the sea, nor could Israel make its own way. Trapped between Egypt's forces and the sea, the people were hemmed in, without an escape route. It was the power of the covenant God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, demonstrated through covenant love, *hesed*, "lovingkindness," that opened up the future through the sea. Israel was not rescued *from* the sea, but *through* it. They would not avoid the sea and its hostile mysteries, but they would watch the sea surrender to the word of the Lord and the uplifted rod of Moses His prophet. Thereby they witnessed the Redeemer God who would remain by their side throughout the coming generations. Good news!

Isaiah witnesses the same God addressing His people *with a new word for a new time*. The setting for the prophet's message in Isaiah 43 is the aftermath of another crisis in Israel's remembered past, namely, their exile to Babylon nearly a millennium after the exodus. As the book of *Isaiah* begins, the march of history thrusts Israel into the Covid-19 of their time which reaches its climax in 587 BCE with the fall of Jerusalem, loss of Temple, and depopulation of its most privileged citizens. Nobles, scribes, priests, and artisans were the prime pickings of the Babylonians in any of its conquests. These classes of people went into exile on foreign soil under alien rule, taking the form of a new slavery. For Jews of that day, the events of the exile looked much like the original oppression in Egypt. If there was to be a reversal of fortunes, *a new Exodus* would be required and *a new way home* for an exiled people. That is why Isaiah admonishes his people, "Forget the former things, do not dwell on the past." The past is both the fond reminiscence of Egyptian liberation and the fatal relapse into Babylon. To "dwell" on the Exodus in the fashion described in 43:18, no doubt meant treating the event in sentimental ways, like longing for the "good old days" that were long past, far behind, only alive in the shared memory of the exiles. One of the *Psalms* preserves the wistful reflections this way:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. ² There on the poplars we hung our harps, ³ for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" ⁴ How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land? (Psalm 137:1-4).

Rather than treat the past romantically, the prophet wants his people to "remember" Zion, the land left behind, through the eyes of the Exodus as a precedent-setting experience. That is, *Exodus can happen again* for Israel

in Babylon just as it happened for Israel in Egypt. And so, “See, I am doing a *new* thing!” In fact, the crossing of the Red Sea in the past wasn’t the final chapter in the Exodus story, for beyond the Sea was the wilderness where God would once more perform His mighty works, providing manna for food, water for thirst, and a way in the desert. All of that is not locked in dusty pages of history but becomes the template for *new* dealings, *new* provisions, and *new* ways, made possible by the God of the Exodus and in the wilderness, for a *new* generation of Jews in the wasteland of Babylon. Such promised developments after the exile would “spring up” in 539 BCE. Persia would defeat Babylon and the Persian king Cyrus would be impressed into the service of Yahweh as His anointed one to bring the exiles home once more.

²² In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing: ²³ "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: "The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you - may the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up" (2 Chronicles 36:22-23).

²⁴ "This is what the LORD says-- your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the LORD, who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself, ²⁵ who foils the signs of false prophets and makes fools of diviners, who overthrows the learning of the wise and turns it into nonsense, ²⁶ who carries out the words of his servants and fulfills the predictions of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, 'It shall be inhabited,' of the towns of Judah, 'They shall be built,' and of their ruins, 'I will restore them,' ²⁷ who says to the watery deep, 'Be dry, and I will dry up your streams,' ²⁸ who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, "Let it be rebuilt," and of the temple, "Let its foundations be laid"' (Isaiah 44:24-28).

Here, then, is the history and prophecy of the New Way and the Kingdom of God *now*. It is expressed in Exodus language: “who says to the watery deep, ‘Be dry, and I will dry up your streams.’” Those words parallel the astonishing wonders of Israel crossing the Red Sea. This is the “new thing” much like the “old thing,” yet funded by the fresh prophetic word of Isaiah’s God. He is the Redeemer *now*, just as He was *then*. When God makes the way once more, He uses the memory of the past to create hope for the message of the future. The same God works at all times in human affairs to perform His purposes in the world on behalf of His covenant people. To be the Lord of His people is for God to be completely reliable, full of fidelity, committed to hope, and “who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself.” The God of the Exodus is the God of creation who once more intercepts the crises of the present with the power of new life for His suffering people in Babylon.

To read the story of Israel means witnessing the continuity of divine faithfulness and obeying the command for human trust. Let’s turn the page, then, at the invitation of Isaiah and from the lips of Jesus. *After Covid-19* is rather like after exile in Babylon or after 9/11 or after whatever tragic drama has invaded the landscape of our undisturbed lives. It’s natural to remember the shared past of American Christians, whether the twin towers or the Second World War or the Great Depression or the pandemic of the early 21st century. Those were events which shook the foundations, stirred the caldron, and sifted the wheat of American life. They were times of reckoning, of reflection, of rage, or of resolution. We walked through them, and often show the scars of those ordeals. There were triumphs, of course, when security kept us safer or economic recovery made us stronger or Normandy made us braver or vaccines made us healthier. And yet that was *then* and this is *now*. Let us not become trapped in the fond memory of the past when the fortunes of the future call us forward and upward.

The Kingdom project refuses the bondage of precedent and reaches for the blessing of promise.

That’s the space we now occupy in the interval between the times, in the wilderness between Egypt and Canaan, in the journey from exile to restoration, and in the long expectation for kingdom of God to accomplish God’s will on earth as in heaven.

For such a time as this, Esther the Jewish queen of Persia was told, you have come to the kingdom (Esther 4:14). Now is the time, and “immediately he called them” (Mark 1:20) — he calls us, His people.

How Does the Kingdom Come? (John 3)

³ Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:3-8).

In this excerpt from Jesus' conversation with a prominent Jewish leader (Nicodemus), *the kingdom of God* takes a prominent place. Two key verbs relate a person to this kingdom: "See" and "Enter." Jesus frames his remarks about the kingdom of God by using the form "no one can ... without" and then increases the urgency by telling Nicodemus "You must be..." Whatever Jesus means by this experience of a different kind of "birth," it belongs to the immediacy of the "here and now." His words are carefully nuanced for the benefit of his astute conversation partner. However, read or heard by our contemporary audiences, the idea of "born again" (the common way of translating the underlying Greek verb) can acquire more than one meaning and thereby obscuring what Jesus might well have intended when he first spoke these words which John wrote down. In what follows, we will try to unpack the fine points of this enormously important text about the kingdom of God.

Most people have, on occasion, had the painful thought, "I wish I could just start over." Or, they catch themselves saying, "I need to turn over a new leaf". Hindsight often convicts us of our failed past, while hope offers us the possibility that we can make a new beginning. C.H. Dodd in his scholarly treatment of the Gospel of John titles the section dealing with John 2:1-4:42 "The First Episode: The New Beginning". John's gospel begins with the familiar words "in the beginning", a phrase which carries the reader's mind back to Genesis 1:1 and the story of Creation. This literary technique makes the reader think about the life and work of Jesus as a *new creation* event. The very first miracle Jesus performed was turning water into wine (see John 2), followed by the dramatic act of throwing the money changers out of the Temple, apparently to make way for something new to be put in their place (*Note: John does not present his material in strict chronological sequence. And so he doesn't mind putting an event like cleansing the Temple at the front of his gospel even though the other gospels put it at the end*).

It's not surprising then to find Jesus engaged in a discussion about "new birth" with Nicodemus in chapter 3. For what happened to the water when it became wine merely foreshadows what God intends to do in human lives as well. Curiously, John 2 ends with these words:

²⁴ But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. ²⁵ He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man. "

Turning water into wine and the dramatic Temple-cleansing provoked many to "believe" in him. But John comments that Jesus was not about to be fooled by first reactions to his work. He was not about to accept this public acclaim like some cheap politician huckstering for a following. Why? "He knew what was in a man." Those words cut to the heart of the human condition. They remind us of the Old Testament assessment of the human heart:

⁹ "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? ¹⁰ "I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve" (Jeremiah 17:9-10).

One fundamental problem John's gospel addresses is the failure of the human heart to believe God. Faith cannot be just some thin intellectual exercise. Faith requires trust and commitment. But human beings are notoriously fickle and unreliable. At the core, human nature is flawed and in need of transformation and new beginnings. It is against this background, that Jesus commences his conversation with the Jewish Rabbi Nicodemus.

The setting of John 3 is nighttime. Darkness is a powerful symbol for evil in the Bible. It is also a way of speaking of the judgment of God on human beings. Its earliest references appear in the book of *Genesis* where darkness covers the deep waters just before God speaks his first creative word: "Let there be light". Before God spoke those words, the world was without form and empty, shrouded in the darkness. In the text before us John

uses just such a setting to present the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. The religious world of Second Temple Judaism was the world in which Nicodemus lived. And that world was already puzzled by what it saw in the work of Jesus. Or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it was divided over him. Why Nicodemus chose the nighttime to meet Jesus, we can only surmise. Was he afraid that the other Jewish leaders would find out he talked with Jesus? Yet those same leaders publicly questioned him. Or was this a different kind of fear: he knew how he felt about Jesus ("a man come from God", "God is with him") and wanted the sort of privacy that would not be interrupted by the presence of many other people in broad daylight. Did he intend all along to make his commitment to Jesus, but was not free to do so in an open way? He clearly did not act that way when he defended Jesus in John 7:50. And he later assisted in the burial arrangements for Jesus (19:39). Still, there is something else we know from the Jewish *Shulchan Oruch* 238:1-2 and elsewhere: that studying Torah at night is even more important than doing so during the day. Jewish people were exhorted by their traditions to think about Torah throughout the watches of the night. Nicodemus might have been inclined to come to Jesus at night because he was devoutly Torah observant and saw this as an occasion to fulfill his obligations. He addresses Jesus as "rabbi", and may have come to receive instruction from him. Impressed by the signs Jesus performed, and expressing his belief that Jesus was a man come from God, Nicodemus comes for some Torah instruction.

But Jesus "knew what was in man". Nicodemus was no exception. He brought his own human condition to Jesus and reveals a bit of it when he says "Can a man be born when he is old?"--a statement leading scholars to think that he was, in fact, *old*. His life patterns were well formed and his attitudes towards the world around him deeply set. His times were not happy ones. He may have become cynical. Too much water under the bridge, he might have thought. But Jesus "knew what was in man". Cutting to the heart of things, he begins with "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." That kingdom was, of course as we have noted above, the great hope and expectation of Israel: that God would become king once again among his people as he had been in the days of David. Much militated against that kingdom, not the least of which was the Roman occupation. But even within Judaism, the skepticism of the age led some to think that it was just better to "live and let live", while others, like the Herodians, simply compromised with the ruling powers. The Zealots among them relied on violence and an eventual last battle when God would appear and destroy his enemies. The Essenes, down by Dead Sea, simply withdrew from corrupt Judaism and attempted to create something new apart from the rest, hoping for a day when the sons of light and darkness would meet in a final struggle.

Jesus had a different perspective. "Born again", he replied to Nicodemus. John's gospel was written in Greek, and the writer intentionally used a word for "new life" that had a double meaning. In the words of Jesus, he did it twice! First, he uses the Greek word *gennan* which can mean either "to be born" or "to be begotten". When birth is in view, the emphasis is on the feminine side of the idea: *give birth*, with all the associations of labor pains and the first appearance of the baby in the world. On the other hand, when the second meaning is intended, the focus shifts to the male image of *impregnation* which occurs at the beginning of the "new life" cycle. It's hard to isolate these two meanings, since one nuance signals *the first inklings of life* while the other nuance marks its *promised arrival*. Taken together they imply the process whereby new human life is brought into the world: *begotten* and then *born*.

The second set of meanings attach to the word translated "again" from the Greek *anōthen*. This word can either mean "again" or "from above". Nicodemus could have heard either meaning in the single word. It seems from his reply to Jesus that he picks up *the birth image* ("enter a *second time* into his mother's woman and be born"). Perhaps this misunderstanding was Nicodemus' way of trying to figure out what Rabbi Jesus intended. The student doesn't have to wait long for a clarification from the teacher. For Jesus employs two words to indicate how the birth takes place: *ek hudatos* ("water") *kai pneumatos* (Spirit). The first word points to the *environment* from which the newborn emerges: "water". The second word points to the *agent* of the begetting: "Spirit". Jesus' answer points back once more to Genesis 1: "2 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the *Spirit of God* was hovering over *the waters*." This *gennan* ("beget" and/or "born") of

which I speak, Jesus tells his inquirer, is both a *begetting* and a *birth*, just as natural birth involves a father and a mother, an agent and an environment. Plainly, the agent of the begetting is the Holy Spirit and the environment of the birth is the human person over whom the Spirit "hovers", calling forth new life.

Human beings live the weak, frail and flawed human existence which Nicodemus knows only too well in his twilight years. Jesus calls this human existence by the simple Greek word *sarx*, usually translated "flesh". Human life, described in its mortality and weakness, is said to be "flesh". Jewish people were familiar with the solemn commentary on the human condition from Isaiah: 40:6-8:

⁶ "The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades: because the spirit of the LORD blows upon it: surely the people is grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades: but the word of our God shall stand for ever. "

This comparison of "flesh and grass" was fitting in the hot arid ecology of the Middle East. Pastureland was in demand and required water which was precious. The fiery sirocco wind could wither vegetation in a short time. Desert dwellers knew this. Israel's national life was grass-like. Nicodemus knew about that. What Israel needs, says Jesus to him, is *a fresh new experience of the Holy Spirit* sweeping across the watery, chaotic deep and impregnating it with the very life of God as once happened at the beginning of the first Creation. But like all wind, the Spirit (Note: the Greek word for *Spirit* and for *wind* is the same) is commanded by the will of God, not man. Nothing that Nicodemus can formulate on his own can create this *new life* and result in a *new birth*.

By using *gennan*, John's portrayal of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus underscores a *process* by which *new life* comes into being. First, a *begetting*; then, a *birthing*. God must do a work through the Holy Spirit in human lives, planting the seed which will result in a new birth. Human beings must be *begotten from above* and then *born again*. The mystery of the blowing wind is the mystery of the Spirit. It comes from heaven ("heavenly things", Jesus says) not from the earth. That is why Nicodemus is puzzled by it: "How can these things be?" His reaction is also ours. Like Jesus' night visitor we also are perplexed by this begetting and birth. Nicodemus could only imagine the event in earthly terms: start over again. Jesus re-imagines it in heavenly terms: from above. Nicodemus sees the only hope in terms of the flesh. Jesus offers a new hope in terms of the Spirit.

Is Jesus merely offering some kind of mystical experience, similar to that offered by the popular folk religion like that of the Gnostics? Does he envision a trance or vision or appearance of angels? Plainly not. He talks instead about his own life's work. He has, after all, "come down from heaven". He will also return there, he tells Nicodemus. But this will only happen after he has been lifted up in the same way Moses lifted up the serpent of healing: (Numbers 21:9):

"And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived."

Humanity, like ancient Israel, has been bitten by the serpent (sin) and stands in need of healing. Jesus will do for fallen humanity what Moses did for Israel: provide the method of new life. He will be lifted up on a cross. All who look to him, who believe in him, will experience the begetting-birth process which leads to new life. And what lies behind this process which leads to *eternal life*? The great love of God for the world gives His Son so that those who believe in him will have *eternal life*. It was not to condemn the world that God sent his Son, Jesus tells Nicodemus, but to *save* the world (John 3:18-19). Faith is nothing less than the human response of trust in the face of God's great love for the world in providing, not condemnation, but eternal life. Not a death sentence, but a commuted sentence and the opportunity for a new life.

This is what the new birth means for Nicodemus and for us. It is God's gift of a new kind of life made possible by Jesus' death and resurrection. What Jesus offers to his conversation partner and to us is not *religion*, but a *relationship*--one that begets from above and births a new life. In a definite sense, what Jesus says to Nicodemus about the new birth mirrors what he would teach his disciples to pray: "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The new birth comes down from heaven to earth in the form of human lives restored by the Spirit. *Our new life is the will of God transforming us into a new creation where He can live through the life of His Spirit. Whenever a human being experiences God's new birth the kingdom of God*

comes to earth here and now. The new birth is God answering our Lord's prayer which he invites us to pray with him.

Receiving the Kingdom as a Child (Mark 10:13-16)

¹³ People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." ¹⁶ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. (Mark 10:13-16).

What strikes us as incongruous about the incident in Mark 10 (also Matthew 19; Luke 18) is that the disciples obstructed those who brought their children for Jesus' blessing. Do not the parents (and grandparents!) of these children who brought them have greater prospects for the future than those who claim to follow Jesus? No doubt the writer intends to *teach* his audience about the perils of being the church when the kingdom comes, and about the perils of being children in a society of sharp social differences. Already the disciples put themselves in a privileged place, opposite the children, supposing that Jesus' kingdom is about bigger and better things than the snotty nose intrusion of troublesome toddlers, when in fact the future belongs to the children more readily than to those who *think* it belongs to them.

What the church reclaims in the kingdom of God is the priority of the child, as the hands of Jesus are placed on children to bless and to pray. In Jesus' earlier comments, "these little ones" have the rapt attention of angels who in turn have the full attention of "my Father." So, when you mess with children, you mess with God. Therefore, when the church observes how the social safety nets that protect children in the city have fallen away, then the church must honor and obey the commands of Jesus: "Take care that you do not despise these little ones," which means paying close attention to not neglecting or ignoring or minimizing the safety of these to whom the kingdom belongs. There is no future for the kingdom in the world without the children. And there is no future for the children if stray bullets and shoddy housing and poor health care and closed schools make the streets a dangerous place to live. Putting such children at risk is, says Jesus in the account from Mark's Gospel, a stumbling block that carries a high price as a capital offence. "Do not stop them." "Welcome me by welcoming them." We're not making this up; Jesus said those things. "Let the little children come to me." Hear the heart call of Jesus for the world as his kingdom comes.

Children are often called "naïve," a curious word in English, borrowed from the French, originating from Latin, and meaning "native, natural." There is also a hint of *innocence*, the notion of being as yet untouched by the complicated world of adult life, unprejudiced by fixed ideas, untarnished by sin, unharmed by malicious acts, and uncorrupted by bad habits. When we think about the child in such terms, there is a longing for the innocence of our earliest beginnings. Even as I write those words, doubt flows over me when thinking about countless infant lives that begin in the dark pessimism of circumstances that are anything but innocent, babies born from mothers with addictions who already metabolize the poison in their bodies before yet understanding anything else about the world or themselves. Could our hope for the naïveté of little ones be itself naïve in the worst sense of that word, namely, the unprotected belief in something that is entirely unreal? However, I think that Jesus would have us *imagine* the naïve world of a child untouched by the damage of social failure, hateful parents, and neglectful guardians. He would ask us to simply watch children at play, singing, dancing, and imagining a world more attuned to the simplicity of their childlike existence. Jesus surely knows about crack babies and abused children as much as he finds hope in a better kind of life. After all, is it not the kingdom that brings a new way of living, free from the very things that assault the innocent and bereave the parents of their little ones?

When a child receives the kingdom, the rest of us are taught a lesson about the nature of trust, of faith, and of new beginnings. The wide-eyed child takes in all the wonders and surprises of the world as God has made it, for His kingdom rules in nature as well as over nations. The *novel* is the prize of children and their source of great delight: to see something not yet *seen* before, to enter a place not yet *been* before, to know something not

yet *understood* before — these are the best sorts of naïveté telling a child that the future need not resemble the past or present and that there is something called hope that springs eternal. Learn from that kind of innocence, Jesus tells his impatient disciples who are bothered by the pestering of playful children. David Bentley Hart, in a talk given in 2006 at St Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary and titled “An End to All Endings,” said the following:

Having departed from the garden of our first innocence, as I called it earlier, we're called not to become disenchanted realists, content to dwell here under the dominion of death, looking for rationales for why there is death, why this person died, refusing to acknowledge the sheer idiot hideousness of death, refusing to recognize death as a thing that is evil but instead learning to be wise and at peace with it -- no! We're summoned, rather, to enter into the city of a second and higher innocence which knows death only as a shadow and a falsehood overcome by infinite love

We are “summoned” by the kingdom of God to see and to enter the world that is coming to earth where the new city is a higher innocence that overcomes the falsehood of death with “infinite love” by the God who gave His only Son so that “we might not perish but have everlasting life.” When we are able to become companions with the spirit of the child in her imagined innocence, then we are free to embrace that hope made possible by seeing the world through our Father’s loving eyes and so enter the kingdom which comes down from heaven to earth. And as we enter its gates, we discover that the children have arrived there ahead of us “because of such is the kingdom of God.”

Should all of that sound naïve and new, that’s because it is. Ours is a time when new beginnings are not mere niceties or enhancements of an otherwise acceptable life, they are rather the signs of what comes at us from the future, comes down to earth from heaven. Lest we think this is all pie in the sky illusion, some kind of self-delusion, we ought to turn to the real life work for our hands to do when our hearts receive the kingdom that is coming from heaven to earth. To that thought we now turn our attention.

Talk is Cheap but the Kingdom of God is Not (Matthew 10:7-8)

⁷ As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' ⁸ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. (Matthew 10:7-8).

There must have been plenty of people listening to Jesus and his disciples talk about the kingdom of God who thought they were out of their minds. “Kingdom” talk had been liberally cast about in the years leading up to the appearance of Jesus in Galilee. Several dissident groups within Judaism agitated for fundamental social change and then proposed projects to make that happen. They were not all peaceful; they were not all public; they were not all living in the same neighborhood. Some took up the sword to strike at the heart of Rome, while others took to the wilderness in cloistered communities, and still others tried to negotiate with the powers that they might live and let live. In every case, they were essentially telling their adversaries, “Jewish Lives Matter,” that the power brokers wouldn’t forget that they had grievances with the status quo. Change was in the air, and yet the form of change was much in dispute.

Jesus stepped into the world of these divided projects with mixed voices. Jesus had something to *say*, and it had the ring of good news about it. Hearing the words “good news” brought back memories of the ancient prophets, especially Isaiah:

⁷ How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, *who brings good news*, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "*Your God reigns.*" ⁸ Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight *they see the return of the LORD to Zion.* ⁹ Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. (Isaiah 52:7-9).

What Jesus *said* echoed what the prophet *wrote*. Writing is for the long-term where messages are preserved and can be remembered. Speaking is for the moment, the here and now, addressing the message to the present situation with the expectation of a remedy before our very eyes. His message is the Isaiah message: “Your God reigns!” The kingdom of God is not exclusively about a place or a territory or even a single nation. Not even the church can claim to be identical to the kingdom of God. Rather, kingdom of God language has to do with “God’s active reign, His living rule, and His royal authority at work in the world.”

George Eldon Ladd wrote his inaugural work on the kingdom of God in 1959: *The Gospel of the Kingdom*. His thoughts in that book are summarized this way:

Ladd's thesis is that the Gospel of God in the New Testament is the redemptive work of God active in history for the defeat of his enemies, bringing men the blessings of the divine reign. Ladd presents the kingdom as a present spiritual reality which gives "already-but-not yet" expression to the kingdom. The kingdom is not only spiritual; it is also an inheritance which God will bestow on his people when he comes in glory. Ladd notes that the kingdom is God's sovereign reign, but God's reign expresses itself in different stages throughout redemptive history. In order to enter the kingdom one must submit himself in trust to God's rule here and now.

The author explains the mystery of the kingdom. The mystery is that the kingdom has come among men and yet men can still reject it. The kingdom will not experience uniform success in this age. Ladd makes it clear that righteousness is required for entrance into the future realm of God's kingdom. This very same righteousness God imparts as he comes to rule within our lives. When one submits himself to the reign of God, the miracle of the new birth takes place within his heart. The author continues to explain that the kingdom demands repentance which determines the quality of present life and future destiny.¹

Therefore, the kingdom of God has palpable form as it arrives in the world. Our text from Matthew 10 identifies concrete ways that the kingdom makes its appearance, namely, healing from sickness, deliverance from death, remedy for plagues of disease, and deliverance from mysterious personality disorders that bizarrely manipulate human beings. The broad range of identified conditions in this text amounts to Jesus saying that there is nothing about the frailty of human life that the kingdom of God cannot address. It is with *power* for redemptive change that the kingdom comes; transformative power that nothing can ultimately resist or defeat. Here, then, are more than mere words. As St. Paul reminds the Corinthian church:

²⁰ For the kingdom of God depends not on *talk* but on *power*. (1 Corinthians 4:20).

Creative *speech* creates *worlds*. The gospel of the kingdom is creative speech which births a whole new civilization. When the gospel is preached, "stuff happens." There is nothing "idle" about the preaching of the gospel for signs and wonders follow its proclamation. The longer ending of Mark's gospel concludes with this summary statement:

²⁰ And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it. (Mark 16:20).

The *creative* word of the kingdom's good news is also a *confirmatory* word, the sign and seal of the Lord Jesus whose kingdom even now makes itself felt in human life, among the nations, throughout the world, even by the principalities and powers that remain unseen but are not untouched by the gospel of the kingdom.

The Kingdom: Beyond Politics

²⁰ Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; ²¹ nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you." (Luke 17:20-21).

It was John Howard Yoder who, when asked which political viewpoint Jesus would embrace, replied, "Jesus does not *have* a politics; Jesus *is* a politics!"² Jesus is *another way* of organizing the world which lay beyond the politics of his own time (whether Pharisee, Sadducee, Herodian, Zealot, or Essene) and beyond our own (Republican, Democrat, etc.). People in Jesus' day were paying close attention to the political options on offer around them. Each one was, in their minds, a possible fulfillment of the ancient promise of the prophets that the kingdom of God would one day come again to Israel. "Here it is!" said some about movement "A." "No, no, there it is!" said others about movement "B." Each advocate pointed to one of several groups that promised a restoration of God's righteous rule and with it the favorable blessings of God. Each party offered deliverance from the enemies of Israel. They were sectarian to the core, partisan to the bone, each one eager for something

¹ <https://davidsteele.blog/2010/02/08/the-gospel-of-the-kingdom-george-eldon-ladd-1959/>

² John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 2.

new and different to rise up in the present time to solve the problems happening *now*. “End the occupation of Rome. Reform the corrupt high priesthood. Purify the worship of Israel. Get money out of the sacred practices of Judaism. Bring home to Israel’s land all of its scattered tribes. Raise the dead and send the Messiah.” Imagine the political slogans and the campaign ads! Which party would put on the most persuasive demonstration of their pet kingdom project?

Jesus made clear in Luke 17 that “God is not coming with things that can be observed.” The kingdom of God is not a reality show or a bit of theater or persuasive drama. Kingdom truth wasn’t like the Olympic Games, filled with lots of cheering and acclaim, complete with metals and crowns. Rather, says Jesus, the kingdom of God is His holy reign is in human hearts, taking the reins of human lives, and becoming king among human communities so that He might reign on earth as He does in heaven. When God is “among you,” the other options sit up and take notice. The Church is a place where the kingdom of God is “among you.” Perhaps no one (other than our Lord) valued the church more than St. Paul whose life had been devoted to preaching the gospel and receiving converts into communities of Christ’s people. The living presence of the living Christ within a living Church was for Paul the epitome of what Jesus meant when he said “the kingdom of God is among you.” That is why he cared deeply about how the church did its work during worship — how the outsider would be impacted by what happened when Christians “did church.” Consider this one insightful example, written by Paul to the Corinthian congregation:

²³ If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your mind? ²⁴ But if all prophesy, an unbeliever or outsider who enters is reproved by all and called to account by all. ²⁵ After the secrets of the unbeliever's heart are disclosed, that person will bow down before God and worship him, declaring, "God is really among you." (1 Corinthians 14:23-25).

Did you hear that? The desirable outcome of kingdom ministry in the church is the acknowledgment by outside unbelievers, “God is really among you.” Is God really among us, palpably present and really resident among us? Kingdom presence among us when we gather together is God’s sign to the unbelieving heart that all of this “stuff” is real and true and to be received by saving faith through Jesus, God’s Son. *Can we identify the sincerity of our worship, the sacrifice of our service, and solidarity of our fellowship with the powerful arrival of God’s kingdom in our midst?*

A Strange Story that Beggars for the Kingdom of God to Come (Matthew 22:1-14)

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ² "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³ He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴ Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' ⁵ But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶ while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. ⁷ The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸ Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹ Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' ¹⁰ Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. ¹¹ "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹² and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. ¹³ Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' ¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen." (Matthew 22:1-14).

Our last text this week is an odd story — a parable told by Jesus that he explicitly compares with the “kingdom of God.” I’ve relied on insights from Lance Pape in what follows so if you disagree with me, he’ll be right over my shoulder!³

We are rightly mystified by the behavior of the characters in this bizarre little story. An initial invitation to come to a feast in honor of the king’s son is met with rejection (verse 3). That’s odd (nobody turns down a royal

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2204; also Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), 588, quoted in Jarvis, Cynthia A., “Matthew 22:1-14: Theological Perspective,” *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew*, Volume 2, Chapters 14-28, WJK, 2013, 186.

summons), but not deeply troubling. A second invitation sweetens the deal with descriptions of the elaborate preparations (verse 4) -- it's going to be delicious! Who wouldn't come to this party? But those invited are apparently unimpressed, and return to business as usual (verse 5). Again, this is unusual behavior -- but it's the kind of strangeness we have learned to expect in a parable.

But then things go completely off the rails. We watch in horror as the servants sent by the king to announce the party are seized, abused, and murdered (verse 6). We didn't see that coming! How did the stakes suddenly get so high? And the weirdness and violence are just getting started. In retaliation, the king goes to war against his own people. Enraged by their actions he unleashes an army. Before we know it, the murderers themselves are murdered, and a city (presumably the king's own city!) is a pile of smoldering ash (verse 7).

But it gets weirder still. With our heads still spinning, we learn that the dinner is still on (verse 8)! Now the invitations go out again, this time to commoners on the "main streets" of the (destroyed?) city (verse 9). Apparently, while soldiers pillaged and slashed -- all the while as great flames devoured the buildings outside the palace walls -- little *Sterno* burners toiled away silently under the sumptuous dishes in the great hall, keeping the meal hot for the eventual guests!

In other words, this is not a realistic story, and my first suggestion for studying it is to tell it in such a way that the hearers are invited to appreciate its absurdities. No doubt this is a disturbing story -- inflammatory, even. But perhaps we can get some perspective and even a little interpretive leverage by coming clean about the ways it strains credibility -- even the special credibility we reserve for parables. With the stakes of realism lowered a bit, we can start to answer some questions.

Why is the narrative so tortured in its twists of plot? Because it is being constructed by Matthew as an allegory of *salvation history*. At the end of the first century, Matthew's community finds itself in conflict with the synagogue down the street, and this story is a tool for thinking about the meaning of that conflict.

Note that this is not a matter of "Christians vs. Jews" -- that kind of thinking would come later -- but an intramural conflict within Judaism. Surely Matthew and his community understood themselves as faithful Jews who had responded to God's summons to the kingdom banquet offered in honor of God's Messiah, Jesus. But others had inexplicably rejected the great invitation, ignoring or persecuting both the prophets of old, and the new missionaries of this good news.

In Matthew's world, a burning city would have called to mind Jerusalem's destruction at the hands of the Romans in 70 CE (or the Babylonians in 587 BCE), interpreted here as God's judgment on those who rejected the new thing God was doing in Jesus. An unexpected invitation to commoners on the main streets points toward the surprising ways the invitation to God's kingdom banquet is increasingly extended to and embraced by those once considered outsiders.

But before we decide that this is just Matthew working out some rhetorical violence against opponents, and assuring his own community that they are on the right side of salvation history, we should read the story to the end: a denouement is coming, and it's a doozy. With the party in full swing, the king enters the banquet hall and moves among the guests. To his dismay, he finds that one of them is not dressed properly. "Friend," he says, "how did you get in here without a wedding robe" (verse 12)? And receiving no satisfactory answer, he has the poor guy bound and thrown out -- not just outside the hall, but into "the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (verse 13). With "friends" like that, who needs enemies?

Again, we find credulity strained to the breaking point: of course the guy isn't dressed properly -- he was pulled in off the street at the last minute! But again, allegory, and not realism, is calling the shots here. Matthew warns his community against self-satisfaction. This king is no pushover, and if the new guests are beneficiaries of an unexpectedly generous invitation, they must nevertheless be on guard against the complacency shown by the

first invitees. The doors of the kingdom community are thrown wide open, and the invitation extends literally to all. But once you come in, there are standards. You can't go on acting like you are not at an extraordinary party.

But even if appropriate clothing is a metaphor for the need for appropriate behavior in the new, inclusive community, the parable may be saying more here than anybody expected -- and the surplus will "preach." Maybe Matthew originally intended this as a stern warning to live up to the rigorous standards of a higher righteousness (5:20, 48), but the story, pushed down and contorted by allegorical demands for too long, rises at the last to assert its own delightful possibility.

Within the world of the story as told, the problem with this guy is not that he is not taking things seriously enough. No, his problem is a failure to party. The kingdom of heaven (verse 2) is a banquet, after all, and you've got to put on your party dress and get with the program. The kingdom music is playing, and it's time to get up on the dance floor. Or, as the slightly more sober, but no less theologically astute Barth put the matter: "In the last resort, it all boils down to the fact that the invitation is to a feast, and that he who does not obey and come accordingly, and therefore festively, declines and spurns the invitation no less than those who are unwilling to obey and appear at all."

All of which begs the question, do we really want God's kingdom to come *now*, even to persons like ourselves who have become part of Christ's church? It's one thing to treat the spiritually disobedient with scorn and then thump our chests that the Lord invited *us*, but how are we showing our love to God and others in the ways we go about the business of being the church *now*? Has the sobering experience of Covid-19 increased our gratitude that Jesus has brought us, like Esther, to the kingdom for such a time as this? Are we "dressed" for the occasion that lies ahead of us and in front of us? If being a Christian is all about grace and gift and giving, what practices are we even now incorporating into our daily life that exude gratitude and celebrate giftedness? Jesus told a parable with "bite and grit," the sort of story that grabs us by the shoulders and shakes us from our complacency. The wedding garment has many nuances within the parable that gesture toward daily life. Let us take time to allow one of them to find us through prayer and reflection during this study of Matthew 22.

Conclusion

"The kingdom is God's reign through God's people over God's place."⁴ In that sentence, Jeremy Treat offers us that succinct way of thinking about the kingdom of God. There's depth to that definition with further dimensions that summarize our thoughts for this week's introductory study in our new series: "Now."

God's Reign

The kingdom is first and foremost a statement about God. God is king, and he is coming as king to set right what our sin made wrong. The phrase "kingdom of God" could just as easily be translated "reign of God" or "kingship of God." The message of the kingdom is about God's royal power directed by his self-giving love.

Claiming that the kingdom of God is primarily about God may seem obvious, but many today use "kingdom" to refer to the way we as human beings make the world a better place ("kingdom work") or to refer to all the Christians in the world ("kingdom minded"). Unfortunately, much of the contemporary talk about the kingdom paints a picture of a kingdom with a vacant throne. But if the kingdom is portrayed as a utopian world without mention of God, then the Bible's vision of the kingdom has been lost. The kingdom of God is the vision of the world reordered around the powerful love of God in Christ.

God is king, and he reigns over his creation. But in a world marred by sin, God's kingship is resisted, and the peace of his kingdom has been shattered. After Adam and Eve's rebellion, God's reign is revealed as redemptive. He's the king who is reclaiming his creation. His kingdom is not the culmination of human potential and effort, but the intervention of his royal grace into a sinful and broken world.

⁴ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/kingdom-god-8-words/>

God's People

God the Creator-King reigns over all his creatures, but he also reigns through his people. This was his design from the beginning. Adam and Eve were commissioned as royal representatives of the king, called to steward his creation and spread the blessings of his reign throughout the earth. Instead, they chose to seek their own path to power and glory, apart from God. Their rebellion fractured humanity's relationship with God and shattered the goodness of his creation. Ever since sin entered the world, God's kingdom project has at its heart a rescue mission for rebellious sinners, drawing them into his renewing work.

God's reign is a saving reign. The kingdom of God provides a holistic understanding of salvation, including not only what we are saved from, but also what we are saved for:

- We are saved from death and for life.
- We are saved from shame and for glory.
- We are saved from slavery and for freedom.
- We are saved from sin and for following our Savior.
- We are saved from the kingdom of darkness and for the kingdom of light.

To be saved into God's kingdom is to embrace God's comprehensive rule over every aspect of life. This is a far cry from merely "asking Jesus into my heart." It means a new life, a new identity, and a new kingdom.

God's Place

The Bible is the story of God making his good creation a glorious kingdom. It all started in the garden, where God commissioned his people to go to the ends of the earth to make the rest of the world like Eden. The garden kingdom was meant to become a global kingdom where people would rejoice and the world would flourish under God's loving reign.

After the fall, making the world God's glorious kingdom would require a reversal of the curse and a renewal by grace. And that's exactly what God set out to do. The Bible is a rescue story, not about God rescuing sinners from a broken creation but about him rescuing them for a new creation. God's reign begins in the human heart, but it will one day extend to the ends of the earth. Many Christians today think of salvation as leaving earth for heaven, but the story of Scripture is quite the opposite. The message of the kingdom is not an escape from earth to heaven but God's reign coming from heaven to earth. The focus of God's reign is his people, but the scope of God's reign is all of creation.

Jesus and the Kingdom of God

This understanding of the kingdom of God may be new to you, but it would not have been surprising to the first-century crowds listening to Jesus. Their collective hope was that God would come as king to redeem his people and restore his creation.

What surprised them about Jesus' proclamation was not what the kingdom is, but who would bring it and how. Jesus fulfills every kingdom promise, but he establishes the kingdom in a way that is different from what they expected and yet more glorious than they could've imagined.

In our journey to understand God's kingdom, this difference introduces a key element. The kingdom message is counterintuitive and surprising, going against the grain of worldly wisdom, because unlike any other kingdom this world has ever seen, Christ's kingdom is built on grace and advances with compassion. In this kingdom, the throne is a cross and the King reigns with self-giving love.⁵ Let us commit ourselves as He invites us to reign with him "on earth as in heaven."

To God Be the Glory! Amen!

⁵ This summary is based on Jeremy Treat's book *Seek First: How the Kingdom of God Changes Everything* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019).