

Luke 4:14-22
June 29, 2008

South Plains
13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Your Kingdom Come On Earth

The Lord reigns!
The Lord is king!
The Lord rules!

That's the golden thread woven through the Bible from beginning to end. According to Genesis, "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep" until God commanded light in the darkness. Egypt was an empire with two millennia of recorded history and armies that had dominated the ancient world until God commanded Pharaoh, "Let my people go."

The people of God became the nation of Israel with their own history of military triumphs. At their best, they remembered that victory was the Lord's. And, when they forgot whose strong arm upheld them, they stumbled.

The Lord reigns!
The Lord is king!
The Lord rules!

When the Gospel of Mark introduces Jesus of Nazareth, he comes proclaiming a simple message in Mark 1:15, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." That was a welcome message because it spoke to the

heart of Old Testament hopes and echoed the psalms they sang every Sabbath in the synagogues. It reverberates through the prophet's cry for God's justice to "roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream (Amos 5:24)."

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he taught them to say, "Your kingdom come." Everything else in the Lord's Prayer is provisional until kingdom come. God's name will always be somewhere profaned, not hallowed. Disobedience and tragedy will cloud every day. People will go without bread, without forgiveness and without deliverance from evil... until the kingdom of God comes on earth. Until the shout of the psalmist can be taken up in perpetual worship by every creature, every stone, every person:

The Lord reigns!
The Lord is king!
The Lord rules!

Of course, people did not respond to Jesus just because his piety rang true. Palestine lived under the thumb of the Roman Empire with a bureaucracy of kinglets and governors and centurions and tax collectors – all paying tribute to Rome.

For some, the kingdom of God promised tax relief.

For some, the reign of God meant religious freedom.

For some, the rule of God sounded like the rule of law and fairness in the courts of justice.

For some, thy kingdom come meant simply an end to hunger and poverty.

So when Jesus picked up the scroll of Isaiah in the Nazareth synagogue and read,
good news to the poor,
release to the captives,
sight to the blind, and
freedom for the oppressed,
he had their attention. That was a message of tangible, substantive, real world, political change. (And we've seen how eager people can be to hear a message of change) The people of Nazareth were not, however, fools. They knew these were deep changes that demanded more than rhetoric. And, when Jesus sat down after the reading of scripture to expound what these words meant, they listened with all their critical senses tuned in.

His sermon, if we can call it that, was deceptively simple and profoundly personal. It was an explosive, one sentence sermon that applied the Isaiah text directly to Nazareth. Here's what he said: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The response to his words took a few moments to sink in. Luke says they all spoke well of him and were amazed at how well he spoke. Then, the impact of his claim took hold. "What a minute," they thought. "He's saying that God is doing these things right now. I haven't seen the blind regain their sight. He's saying "the Spirit

of the Lord is upon" him to bring good news. 'Is not this Joseph's son?' What does he know that we haven't heard a million times before? If he really did miraculous healings and such in those other towns and villages, why doesn't he do them here in Nazareth? They understood that Jesus was claiming to bring the kingdom that very day.

Within a few verses, Luke records a dramatic change in the temper of the congregation in that synagogue. They go from speaking well of Jesus to being filled with rage over his words. They drive him out of town and try to throw him from a cliff. But, he escaped; and the New Testament does not tell us that Jesus ever visited Nazareth again. He was a prophet kicked out of his hometown.

The Lord reigns.
The Lord is king.
The Lord rules.

But, the evidence was not there that day in Nazareth.

When we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," we are affirming the hope of Israel and the promise of Jesus, a promise that the kingdom of God is very near. "In fact," says Jesus, "the kingdom of God is among you (Luke 17:21)."

So what was God looking for in Nazareth that day? And, what is God looking for in Keswick? God is looking for two responses to this announcement. The first response God expects is that we will recognize

Jesus as the bringer of the kingdom. Jesus' ministry of teaching and healing inaugurates the presence of God's kingdom on earth. He is the kingdom incarnate. Quite a claim. And, this is what gave the good people of Nazareth such heartburn. Why would God have the carpenter's son bring in the kingdom? That's a question people are still asking.

Jesus plays a number of roles in this drama. He is the teacher who interprets what kind of kingdom this is. Instead of being a particular piece of geography, it's everywhere that God rules. Jesus is also the example, the primary embodiment of divine rule, the complete person, making him the model for human behavior. More than just one example among many, however, Jesus plays the key role that moves the action forward. He is finally the leader who sacrifices his life because he will not retract his criticism of the scribes and Pharisees and he will not renounce the title King of the Jews. He's the bringer of the kingdom.

When the hometown folks reject him for his chutzpah, they foreshadow the ultimate rejection of his message, his example and his leadership. To reject Jesus this way means to reject God's reign. So the first response God wants is simply to acknowledge Jesus' role in the kingdom. That role is summed up in the title Christ.

The second response appropriate to the kingdom is more nuanced. It is captured in the words of the

prayer that say, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." If the kingdom of God could be located on a map, say the 1948 boundaries of the nation Israel; or the Presbyterian Church; or the United States of America, -- all places that would like to be considered the kingdom of God -- then our entrance into the kingdom would be as straightforward as moving to that place. But, since the kingdom is where God reigns, where God is obeyed, where God's will is actually carried out, we have to live it.

We have to act as though,
The Lord reigns!
The Lord is king!
The Lord rules!

Where? In my life. In your life.

When we're driving to an appointment and we see our neighbor in need.

When we sit behind our desk and another worker presents us with a problem.

When a customer tempts us to bend the truth.

When we're working out at the gym, or walking down the fairway, or picking up the kids.

The Lord reigns where God's will is done. The prosperity of central Virginia is ours to share. The problems of affordable housing and adequate healthcare cry out for our expertise. An environment that is beautiful, but stressed, waits for us to make it more fruitful. The embodiment of God's kingdom on earth is among us, the people of God.

Psalms 95 and 96 invite us to become that kingdom. I'd like to invite you to use those psalms now as our response to Jesus' announcement of the kingdom. It's found in the back of our Hymnbook in selection 22 which we can read responsively.

(read Psalm 95:1-7a, 96)

Let us pray. You have called us to live in your kingdom by the grace of Christ and in the power of your Holy Spirit. We pray that as you judge the world with righteousness and truth, you will find us living under your loving rule.