

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

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Hope Lutheran Church and School

Idaho Falls, Idaho

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In today's reading of Matthew's account of the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry, we hear what some call Jesus' first sermon. Says Matthew, Jesus "began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (4:17). The kingdom of God had come near. After that, Jesus commenced the calling of twelve men to be His apostles, Andrew and Peter, and James and John being among the FIRST of those apostles.

Walking and travelling throughout Galilee with Jesus, the rabbi whose teaching was unlike any other rabbi's teaching, and seeing Him work miracles of bodily healings, deliverance from demons and from every affliction, the PROSPECT of the kingdom of heaven being at hand, being NEAR to them, was looking very bright and powerful, and dare I say "happy"? "FINALLY," the apostles seemed to have thought, "the favored position of strength and power AMONG the nations and INDEPENDENCE FROM the rule of OTHER nations----which the land of Israel HAD in times past---was going to be restored, by the leadership of someone so great that even demons obeyed His voice evicting them from their human prey,

and diseases and paralysis lost their hold on bodies at the touch of Jesus' hand and the word of His command."

It was quite natural for the apostles to ASSUME that these powerful signs indicating that the kingdom of heaven was near to them and advancing among their countrymen, that such powerful earthly victory and bodily comfort would be the NORM, the every day occurrence so long as they followed Jesus and stuck close to HIM. And look at the CROWDS of eager listeners and followers that gather around Jesus! People from Galilee and the "Ten Cities" near and far from the northern Jordan River, and from Jerusalem and Judea. One cannot outdo the statistical growth of numbers of THAT magnitude. The great, authoritative, miracle-working Rabbi Jesus was SERIOUS when He said to Peter and Andrew, "I will make you fishers of MEN!" Fishers of the SOULS of men. Such is the natural way that WE think, or at least WISH, that the nearness of God's kingdom would ALWAYS manifest itself: in power, in prosperity, in comfort uninterrupted, and IMMEDIATE needs met IMMEDIATELY.

But by ASSUMING that the kingdom of heaven drawing near paves an easy street for us to stroll upon in THIS life in THIS world in which we are presently living, we set ourselves up to be disillusioned, disappointed, when, in serving and following Christ Jesus, our needs are NOT ALWAYS IMMEDIATELY met, and we

sometimes have to wait long for some of them TO be met, or affliction stays longer than what we find to be comfortable, and, as the hymn has us to ask one another in song, “Are we weak and heavy laden,” and we have to say, “yes,” “Cumbered with a load of care?” and we with lowered brow are bidden to admit, “yes,” And we ask, “Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?” and with heavy hearts we confess, “yes.”

In our minds that assume that all will be rosy if we stick closely to Jesus, it is in times like THOSE that we might say IN our minds, “I thought that the kingdom of heaven being at hand and NEAR to me meant that I would NOT HAVE such problems like these any longer.” When blessings that we enjoyed are temporarily or for a very long time removed from us, we might resort to asking, “Lord, did I miss the boat? Are You still WITH me?” or worse, “Lord, what have I done to deserve this?” as if the kingdom of God and its blessings had something to do with our merit, which it doesn’t.

But think with me: Have we thought, have we secretly ASSUMED, that this world in its flawed condition and fraught with forces fighting against God and His good will could contain or would be able to sustain the glorious kingdom of God in

all its fullness? If we have, then we understand the apostles of Christ Jesus, because THEY ALSO expected that the kingdom of heaven would come fully into this world and be set up in power in this life in this world.

But there is something in today's reading from the apostle Matthew's account that gives us a hint that there is something UNEXPECTED that the kingdom of heaven drawing near to us brings with it. Keep in mind that Matthew writes this AFTER Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven to invisibly fill all things. Matthew writes:

“When [Jesus] heard that John [the Baptist] had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee” (4:12).

At the time that this happened, I don't think the apostles understood the connection between John's arrest and what that said about Jesus' ministry or their calling. But we see that after John the Baptist had baptized Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah, a privilege that no other prophet before him nor SINCE him had EVER had, and John continued to preach the Word of God, in particular against King Herod's unlawful marriage---in other words, the kingdom of heaven was drawing near to him and to the people---and Herod arrested John and put him in prison, the drawing near of God's kingdom is NOT ALWAYS an easy road when it sets itself down among sinners in this sinful world.

The time would come when Jesus, the Christ and our Lord, would announce to His apostles that He would be crucified, would die by crucifixion, and would be buried in a tomb, and even though Jesus also announced that He would rise from the dead, that did NOT SOFTEN the blow of the FRIGHTENING news that He, the KING of God's kingdom, would be crucified. The apostle Peter tried to convince Jesus that such a horrible thing would NEVER happen to his Lord, but the Lord Jesus rebuked Peter for trying twice to prevent it from happening.

Now we see more of what the picture of the kingdom of heaven drawing near to us includes and indeed is the central figure and scene of it: The kingdom of heaven being close at hand to us is Christ Jesus HIMSELF being despised, and forsaken, and crucified FOR us in order to FINALLY put to death our sins which kept us out of God's kingdom. There were enemies greater than any others, which could be defeated ONLY by the outpouring of the blood of the innocent Son and Lamb of God upon the cross, those enemies being our sin, our SINS, this evil world and its ways, hell, the devil, and death. By His blood poured from His veins on the cross, Jesus Christ has vanquished them all to set us free, and He bodily rose from the dead so that life and immortality have come to light in Him, in Him who sticks closer to us than anyone ever can.

The kingdom of heaven being at hand means that now we have GOD in the flesh bearing our afflictions and carrying our sorrows. It means that He carries us ESPECIALLY when we are weak and heavy laden, ESPECIALLY when we are cumbered with a load of care, and ESPECIALLY when friends despise and forsake us.

The message of “REPENT, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” means that the Holy Spirit changes our minds over to the truth that, Yes, this means that the kingdom of God comes to us in power to heal, comfort, defend, and to deliver us in great power and glory---and so often it DOES, and we must give God our joyful praise when it so often DOES so---but it ALSO means that WHEN WE ARE struck again and again by the violent waves of evil in this world, and our needs are **not** IMMEDIATELY met, and WHEN WE ARE weak and heavy laden, and WHEN THOSE WHOM WE ASSUMED WERE FRIENDS DO forsake us BECAUSE we belong to Jesus, or WHEN WE DO SIN and we are sincerely sorrowful over those sins, CHRIST JESUS remains with us and will NEVER forsake us, and He heals and forgives us and restores us to Himself continuously. The Holy Spirit says---and surprisingly this is in the OLD Testament, in Isaiah, chapter 63---“In all [the affliction of God’s people in Christ] [**CHRIST**] was afflicted ... in his love and in his pity he REDEEMED them;

he LIFTED them up and CARRIED them ..." (63:9a, b-c), and He always WILL.

Amen.