

Pastor Joe Polzin
Acts 1:1-11
“Thy Kingdom Come”
Year A – Ascension Day (Observed)
May 28, 2017

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the Lord’s Prayer, we pray, “Thy kingdom come.” Martin Luther, in his Small Catechism explains what this means, “The kingdom of God certainly comes by itself without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may come to us also.” Jesus taught us to pray that the kingdom of God would come, be a part of our lives, and that we would be included in its activity. But I wonder what we actually think of God’s kingdom... or perhaps we don’t quite know what it is.

We don’t talk about kings or kingdoms all that much these days. This is a concept that would have sounded very different to someone in the pre-modern era, the era of kings... someone who would have known what it’s like to live under a king, and be a subject of a kingdom. It was a reality of their daily life. But, today, not so much. Yes, we have our own governments, but in a day and culture that praises hyper-individuality and autonomy, we shudder to think of being subjected to anyone who would lord over us. So, when we pray “thy kingdom come,” I wonder if we can fully appreciate what it is we are praying.

Jesus talked a lot about the kingdom of God. He spent his ministry teaching his disciples and the crowds about what the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven, is like. Those phrases appear nearly 100 times in the New Testament. And in our reading for today, from Acts chapter 1, we see that Jesus is *still* talking about the kingdom of God. Luke tells us, “[Jesus] presented himself alive to [the apostles] after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the *kingdom of God*” (1:3). We get the impression that this was the main topic of conversation that a post-resurrection Jesus had with his disciples.

And it’s likely what prompted their question, then, in verse 6, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” And we aren’t sure exactly what they had in mind when they asked this, probably because *they* weren’t sure what they had in mind. Their misguided expectations of Jesus had been shattered time after time. Throughout their years of knowing him, they came to know him as more than just a good man and a good teacher, but also as their Lord and their God. And especially in past couple months, they watched their Lord and their God go to the cross and die, which no one thought possible, and on the third day rise again.

And they *had to have known* that the fact that they now walked and talked with a risen Jesus, *a Jesus who had conquered death itself*, was *so* significant to what kind of King he was and what kind of kingdom he led. But they weren’t quite sure *why*... they weren’t sure yet *what* his kingdom looked like or *when* to expect it. What was Jesus going to do as King, and what was their life as a Christian going to be like in God’s Kingdom now that Christ had been raised from the dead? Hence, their question.

And Jesus provides his answer, but it probably wasn’t what they were expecting: “‘It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.’ And when he had said these

things,” our text goes on, “as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight” (1:7-9).

You see, the disciples would have had the opposite problem from us today. They were well aware of what it was like to have a king, and live in a kingdom. Israel had a great history of kings, especially going back to the days of David and Solomon. Currently, Israel was under the control of a foreign king in Rome, Caesar. What’s more, they had come to know their Lord Jesus as the true King. Yet, here they stood, staring into the heavens, as they watched their King go away. How was this part of the plan? How is Christ the King if they couldn’t see him? Who was in control? And what did this mean for them?

You know, even though we don’t currently live in a political kingdom, I think we all still have a deep-down longing for *God’s* kingdom. And the reason this is so, is even if we as a culture insist that each person is independent, and in control of their own lives, and free to do whatever it is we want, we actually know at some level that it isn’t true. Because as much as we each want to be the king in our own lives, the one who’s in control, when we actually start going through the day-to-day process of living our lives, we realize that very little of what happens is in our control.

It doesn’t take long to look around and begin to see all the forces besides our own attempting to exert control over our lives. This past week alone, a suicide bomber in Manchester, or a rampant car in Times Square, led those people to feel powerless as their lives were in danger. That’s the goal of terrorism, to take away any sense of security and replace it with fear, with terror. And terrorism is actually nothing new, as the devil and his forces have been attempting to take away any sense of security the people of God have, beginning with Adam and Eve secure in the Garden, and tempting us with a semblance of control, and when we fall, replacing our feeling of security with the terror of sin.

Make no mistake, the devil and the forces of this fallen world are still at work all around us. The devil would like nothing better than for you to feel in control when the job’s looking up, the finances are in order, the family is healthy, the doctor’s report comes back with good news, your world appears to be a safe and stable place. But then, when one of those things goes the other way, when the rug is pulled out from beneath us, when the security we thought we had has vanished, the devil loves when we wonder, “Who’s actually in control? Whose kingdom am I in?”

Some of you today know very well that you’re not in control of certain areas of your life right now, and you don’t need to be reminded of the fact that if it were up to you, things would look entirely different. You feel the attacks of this fallen world, of the devil, even of your own sinful nature. We can all look around, or watch the news, and think, what security do I actually have? What does it mean to be a part of the kingdom of God? If Jesus truly *is* King, as the disciples wondered that ascension day, when will he restore his kingdom to us?

The ascension of our Lord Jesus, what we celebrate today, is so crucial for our understanding the kingdom of God, because it provides us the answers to all of those questions. When the disciples asked Jesus about his kingdom, they didn’t realize how he was preparing them for a new era of what that kingdom would look like. They were standing on the start line, and Jesus was getting them ready to go.

You see, when Jesus entered this world, he proclaimed that the kingdom of God was coming, as was now here in him. The kingdom of God was ushered in by Christ himself. And though, in the moment of the cross, it appeared that the reign and rule of the devil had overcome the reign and rule of God, that sin and death had laid claim to King Jesus and won, the opposite

was actually true. Our King went to the cross by his own authority, so that when he was raised from the dead, he shattered *any* claims that sin, death, or the devil had over him. And he did it for us, so that now, as subjects in his kingdom, we are subject to nothing but his forgiveness and his love. That means that nothing can lay claim to us, no sin, no tragedy, no scheme of the devil, because Christ our King has claimed us for his own. Jesus' resurrection meant nothing could stand in his way, and that he now rules without opposition.

The day is coming when Christ *will* rule *visibly* over creation as Lord and King, when he returns again to raise us from the dead and restore all that he has made. As the angels said to his disciples, gazing into heaven, "This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (1:11). It's at that time that his kingdom will be visibly restored to us, but as Jesus said, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority" (1:7). But we know it's coming, and we joyfully await that day.

So, until then, what happens? Does it mean until then the kingdom of God is far off, or doesn't exist right now? Does Christ's ascension mean he went away and we're subject to any other power until then? No, not at all. As we confess in the Creed, "He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty..." The right hand of God is not only the physical place from which he rules as King over all, but also the power which the Father has given him to be King today, and for eternity

As Paul in our Epistle reading states, "[The Father] raised [Christ] from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come" (Eph. 1:20-21). Which means, that though we may struggle with a seeming lack of control, and though we may long for the return of our King on that great Last Day, he assures us that we are, in fact, firmly planted in the kingdom of God right now, and that He is in control. And more than that, we, like the disciples, are now prepared to be a part of this new era of God's kingdom, the era of the Church, with Christ as its head.

I want you to notice something, something that was said right at the beginning of the book of Acts. Remember, the book of Acts is like the Gospel of Luke, part two. Luke, a companion of Paul during his missionary journeys, wrote a detailed account of the work of Christ, and he was writing to a person, Theophilus, which means, "friend of God."

The book of Acts picks up right where Luke's Gospel ends. And he begins this part two by saying, "In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach..." (1:1). "Began to do and teach." Luke's Gospel dealt with all that Jesus began to do, indicating that Jesus is going to continue to work and teach in this era of the Church. Which, is interesting, because Jesus has ascended into heaven. How does this work? Well, Jesus continues to work and teach through his Church by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Back in John chapter 16, right before Jesus goes to the cross, he tells his disciples, "It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you" (16:7). Next week, we celebrate the fulfillment of this promise, when the Holy Spirit came to guide and empower Christ's Church. And the book of Acts traces the beginnings of exactly how that happened, and how, just as Jesus commissioned his disciples, they would be his witnesses, first in Jerusalem, then Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

New Testament scholar, Jeff Gibbs, says this, "The [kingdom] of God is not primarily a place. Rather it is a divine action that occurs where Jesus is, through his words and deeds." Jesus established his kingdom by his death and resurrection. He will fully restore his kingdom in the day when he returns to raise us from the dead. And until then, his kingdom is very much present,

and he has made us very much a part of it. The kingdom is wherever Jesus is, through his words and deeds. And where do we hear his words and see his deeds? It begins right here in church. As we hear Christ's voice in his Word. And see him work on our behalf in his Sacraments, Baptism and Holy Communion, as we receive forgiveness for our sins.

And when we pray, "Thy kingdom come," we're praying that God's kingdom would be a part of our lives, as well. Jesus ascended as King, but continued to work through his apostles. Jesus is still King, and continues to work through you and me. He has entrusted the furthering of his kingdom to us, his Church, which means we can speak his words to others, and we can work on his behalf, by the power of the Holy Spirit within us. God's kingdom come, indeed, and we a part of it. In Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in our *risen and ascended* Lord, Christ Jesus. Amen.