

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Praying Like Jesus: Holy Be Your Name”
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Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 6:9-13

Our focus from the Lord’s Prayer this week is “Thy Kingdom Come.” Throughout Matthew’s Gospel, God’s kingdom is an important piece. Matthew’s primary goal for writing is to show devout Jews that Jesus is the promised Messiah. To do this Matthew links Jesus’s life and teachings to the prophecies in the Old Testament. Matthew uses specific words from the prophecies about Messiah, his references things like the Passover lamb, the servant of the Lord, and Jesus being betrayed by Judas, deliberately. Matthew pulls images from the Jewish tradition, holds them up to his Jewish audience like transparent paper through which they can’t help but see Jesus as the long-awaited messiah. These prophecies were well known because they told Jews how to recognize the Messiah, where he would come from and what he would say and do.

Matthew’s task to link Jesus to the Messiah prophecies was not easy. The prophecies had developed a life of their own. After years and years of interpretation the religious community had all sorts of crazy ideas about the Messiah. They were looking for a conquering king who would inspire troops with speeches about God’s glory and the evil of the world. People were waiting for a mighty leader who would crush all other power and sit on a golden throne to rule over the Kingdom of God.

So... essentially Jesus...right?

Matthew does his best to show those ideas were wrong and that Jesus is indeed the Messiah the prophets had foretold. He starts the whole book off with a genealogy of Jesus that makes it clear he is from a line of kings, of David, and heir to the forefathers of Abraham. Jesus’ rightful place, his birth right, is a throne, even though he picks a donkey to ride around. Matthew’s task was tricky. The Kingdom was not just important to Matthew, Jesus talks about God’s Kingdom all the time. Mark opens his gospel with Jesus preaching the about Kingdom of God. In Luke, Jesus admits this is an obligation; he “MUST” preach the Kingdom of God because that is why he is sent. If the Kingdom of God is why Jesus was sent then we need to figure out what this Kingdom thing is. If the kingdom did not need Jesus to be a conquering warrior king then what does a kingdom look like with Jesus at the lead.

One would think since the Kingdom is so important to Jesus’ message Jesus would be clear about it in his teachings. He isn’t. Jesus did not talk about the Kingdom in just one way.

At times Jesus says that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets were in the Kingdom. God’s Kingdom is something that has happened in the past. Later Jesus says the Kingdom of God is “within you and among you” so something that is active now in the present. But Jesus also tells us to pray “Thy Kingdom come” as if there is a need to still look forward to the kingdom actively coming into the world.

In the prayer, “Thy Kingdom come” sounds like hope for something still to come. A prayer that God will send the Kingdom in short time so that we may revel in the joy and surplus of the Kingdom of God. This is how the words would have sounded to the people who were waiting on the Messiah king and his kingdom.

They knew they lived in a Kingdom already, but that was the Kingdom of Rome. The oppression, guilt, inequality, and hate that were in this kingdom were signs that they did not live in the Kingdom of God. The coming of the Kingdom of God was the very reason they were looking so hard for a Messiah, a new King, to crush the powers that were and bring about a perfect society operating solely within God's will. A will that by no means included things like oppression, guilt, inequality, and hate.

Thy Kingdom come...soon...please! is their prayer. But when we take into account that Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God had existed with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the prophets, and his teaching that the kingdom was within and among us we are forced to see these words not only a hope, but as a statement. Thy Kingdom, come. This is an invitation.

The Kingdom of God is not something we can pray into existence; the Kingdom is God's work and it is already done. When God makes the covenant with Abraham he does not say if you follow my rules I will bless you. God says I have blessed you. When Jesus dies on the cross there is no condition upon which he will forgive our sins, God's work through Jesus is just done. When Jesus says he is sent to tell about the Kingdom of God he is not saying he came to prophesy, to tell of something to come later. He was there to point it out already in the world. The Kingdom is here.

The concern then becomes, if we live in the Kingdom of God now, why is there still oppression, guilt, inequality, and hate. If the Kingdom of God is here, then the Kingdom of God does not look like we want it to. Again, we run into a problem of expectations. The supposed warrior King messiah did not show up, so maybe the Kingdom we expected him to bring is also different. Our expectation is that the Kingdom will overcome all power and be the only thing we see, the only sound we hear will be God's voice. In reality it is a song that can be drowned out if we let it.

I've heard people say that the true accomplishment of graduating seminary is graduating with your faith. They say this because students spend so much time studying, analyzing, and picking apart scripture and faith practices that after awhile nothing holds much meaning. Everything you hold sacred is criticized and shown how small it really is. Weekly crisis of faith are common. One crisis I faced dealt with the Lord's prayer. I had heard it so often, said it thousands of times myself, to the point where it became meaningless. Have you ever said a word so often, or written it down and suddenly are not sure it's right? You aren't even sure you are still dealing with an English word. That is what happened to the Lord's Prayer for me.

I told a professor the struggle I was having with the Lord's prayer, and she sympathized with me. She said I was free to pray something else because there were so many Christians around the world that at any given time someone else would be praying the Lord's prayer anyway. As I tried to find my way back to enjoying the Lord's Prayer I read a comment from William Barclay, a famous new testament interpreter. He said the Lord's prayer has two great uses. One at the beginning of devotions, to awaken holy desires, and the other at the end of devotions to sum up all we ought to pray for.

I read this and thought: fine whatever, and turned on the TV. The show that came up was Star Talk with Neil Degrasse Tyson. He is an astrophysicist that has spent his career making astrophysics accessible to people like me...non-astrophysicists. In this episode he showed an image of the earth from space and pointed out the way the beam of light from the sun makes a circle of light on the surface of the earth. At the edge of that circle there is a transition from light to dark or dark to light, also known as dawn and dusk. He explained that at any given time there is a ring around the earth of places switching from light to dark or dark to light. A continuous dawn and dusk. One guest on the show was a musician and said that birds and bugs sing at dawn and dusk, so this ring of dawn and dusk also orchestrates a continuous song that circles the earth at all times, just in different places.

William Barclay's comments on the Lord's prayer came back to mind, as well as my professor's. If there are so many Christians in the world, praying this prayer at the open and close of their days, then there must also be a continuous Lord's prayer being presented to God.

That is something I wanted to be a part of. I immediately prayed the Lord's prayer. Before I began I thought about the person who was just ending the prayer somewhere in the world, and as I finished I imagined someone picking up the tune somewhere else.

The Kingdom of God is the greatest tune ever composed, but it is up to us to keep playing it. Every time and place where this tune is played, where the will of God is carried out, that is where the Kingdom of God is.

Jesus said the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. Just the seed, not the full-grown plant. A small vessel of potential that gets replanted every season.

So it is not wrong to pray "Thy Kingdom come" as a hope filled prayer. We do still need this Kingdom to come again and again. But we should also remember the Kingdom is here and we are invited to come and be a part of it.