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The Gospel of Luke
LVIII. The Now and Not Yet of the Kingdom
Luke 17:20-37

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The Pharisees ask Jesus when the Kingdom of God will come. Jesus tells them that the Kingdom is already here: “*For behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.*” But then, immediately thereafter, Jesus turns to His disciples and tells them the Kingdom of God is still to come: “*For as lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day.*” This is the now and the not yet of the Kingdom of God. And this now and not yet of the Kingdom is important for disciples then and now to understand.

Let’s begin with the now of the Kingdom of God. Writer Robert Siegel and his wife Anne live in New England. For years they had driven past a sign pointing to Mt. Monadnock – a mountain made famous in a poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson, in which he used the mountain as an image to explain his philosophy of transcendentalism:

*On the summit as I stood,
O’er the floor of plain and flood
Seemed to me, the towering hill
Was not altogether still,
But a quiet sense conveyed . . .¹*

It goes on, and on, from there – but I’m just guessing you’re not anxious to hear the rest.

Anyway, one day Siegel and his wife decided it was time to visit the famous Mt. Monadnock. They followed the sign, took the turn, and headed towards the mountain. After a mile or so, they started seeing encouraging signs that they were getting near: “*Monadnock Realty*,” “*Monadnock Pottery*” and so forth. But the mountain itself never appeared, nor any further signs pointing towards it. They went up and down the road several times looking – but no Mt. Monadnock. Then, suddenly, it dawned on them. That, in the first place, Mt. Monadnock was not as they expected it to be – a great mountain standing tall over the horizon, like Mont Blanc in the Alps. And then, second, that the reason they couldn’t see Mt. Monadnock anywhere around them was because they were already on it, and had been driving across it the whole time.²

And that, in a nutshell, is the meaning of the answer Jesus gives to the Pharisees when they ask Him when the Kingdom of God will come. He answers them, “*The kingdom of God is in the midst of you.*” Which means, first, that they are looking for the wrong thing when they picture the Kingdom of God. The Pharisees pictured the Kingdom of God to be the arrival of a great military

leader, like David, who would rally Israel to arms, drive out the Romans in a violent victory, and so restore Israel to political, military, and economic dominance. But Jesus, from the very start, had described the coming of the Kingdom quite differently. As He announced to the hometown crowd in Nazareth at the beginning of His ministry, what the Kingdom of God was going to look like, instead, was good news being proclaimed to the poor, liberty to the captives, the restoring of sight to the blind, and the setting at liberty those who are oppressed.³ The Pharisees are looking for the wrong things – which is the first reason they cannot see that the Kingdom of God is already in their midst.

But the second meaning of Jesus' answer to them is even more specific. When He says to the Pharisees that the Kingdom of God is already in their midst, He is also speaking literally – as in it's currently standing right there in front of them! The coming of Jesus Christ into this world at Bethlehem was nothing less than the coming of the King to begin the work of establishing His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. What most defines the Kingdom of God is the presence of its King, Jesus Christ. Wherever King Jesus is, there is the Kingdom of God. And so, for us also, because Jesus Christ has already come into this world, the Kingdom of God is already here, right in our midst. The Kingdom of God is right here, right now. We just need to know what to look for. We just need to remember Whom to look for – that we might be able to recognize the Kingdom when it is right in front of our eyes. And, if we know the King, then we can readily look around this world, look around our lives, and see abundant signs that the Kingdom of God is, truly, already in our midst – like Siegel and his wife already standing on Mt. Monadnock.

A further hint? How about these: *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son . . . ;”*⁴ *“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another . . . By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”*⁵ In other words, if we want to see the Kingdom of God already present in this world – the now of the Kingdom – and if we want to see the presence and power of our King at work in this world, then love is one of the best places to start. To look for moments when His love enables us to overcome estrangement, when His love enables us to overcome anger and guilt and hatred and violence and all other forms of brokenness in this world. Look for the moments when His love makes broken things whole. Then we will see the now of the Kingdom of God, the now of the King present in our midst.

So many stories, so many illustrations of this now of the Kingdom to choose from – and I know you can think of many of your own. But here's just one. A writer named David McGrath tells of a childhood memory – an encounter between his dad and Mr. Zakowski. Big, mean, rotten Mr. Zakowski lived in the neighborhood where McGrath grew up – and all the neighborhood children feared him. Mr. Zakowski's house bordered the vacant lot where the neighborhood children played baseball. Hit a ball into Mr. Zakowski's yard, and it was gone. He would come out with a sneer on his face, grab the ball, and go back inside – he was impervious to all pleas for mercy. One day, says McGrath, one of the boys fouled off a pitch into Mr. Zakowski's yard. Mr. Zakowski didn't seem to be home, so McGrath volunteered to go find the ball. He climbed the fence and was bent over, looking under the foundation of the house, when suddenly Mr. Zakowski appeared and jerked him backwards by his ankles so hard that his face scraped the ground and his nose poured blood.

McGrath ran home to tell his father what had happened. His father had a shocked look on his face, even as he staunched the flow of blood. But what happened next was even more shocking:

My father marched me back to the “crime scene,” where I waited at the now empty ball diamond. I watched him open the gate and approach Mr. Zakowski, already waiting in the yard.

A shortstop in high school, my father, now a tile salesman, was below-average height and “soft” around the middle. Mr. Zakowski glared down at him, his fists balled at his side.

I was thinking how I could still feel where he had grabbed me by the ankles, when I saw Mr. Zakowski’s fists suddenly unclench. Then he stepped back, tilting his head as though to better ascertain my father’s words. He appeared to take a deep breath. Miraculously, he shrank – or somehow became just less frightening.

“And we thought . . . I thought you were scared of him, Dad,” I said later as we walked home.

He shook his head no. “I guess I am afraid of a couple of things: one being God, and another if something bad ever happened to any of you.”

“But what did you say, Dad? He’s so mean.”

He looked at me with tenderness, and I remembered the dry blood on my face.

“I asked him his name, Son. His first name.”

The next day, we found all of last season’s baseballs in a wooden bushel basket set on home plate, my bright new one on top of the pile. Nor would any more be confiscated that summer. Even when Owen fouled one high into the gutter, “Leo” Zakowski climbed his ladder and tossed it back onto our field from his roof.

More had been said between my father and Leo, of course. But the idea that most people would love to be able to unclench their fists, if only somebody showed they cared – that’s what stuck.⁶

“For behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.” The Kingdom of God is now, it’s already here – if we know what to look for, and if we know the One who is already our King.

Having answered the Pharisee’s question about the coming of the Kingdom, Jesus then turns to His disciples and begins to say something rather different to them. To the Pharisees He speaks of the now of the Kingdom of God – but to His disciples He speaks of the not yet of the Kingdom. The now yet – meaning that the Kingdom of God is still to come in terms of its fullness and finality. Jesus tells His disciples that there will come a day – an unmistakable day, like a flash of lightning across the sky – there will come a day when He will return to them in glory, and the Kingdom of God will indeed then be fully upon this earth as it is in heaven. As Paul puts it, that day when, at last, *“every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”⁷*

In other words, the Second Coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus. For some Christians, it seems, the Second Coming acts as the chief doctrine of the Christian life, and they become obsessed over figuring out when it will be – even though Jesus specifically told us that we should not do that, that the date was not for us to know. For other people, most Presbyterians perhaps, it is a doctrine we like to avoid – which is also something Jesus told us we should not do. But whether we obsess over Jesus’s return, or whether we avoid it – I think our basic problem with this doctrine is that we see it as a doctrine which inspires fear and trembling. For those obsessed with the Second Coming, it’s not so much their fear of Jesus’ return as it is the idea that they can use the Second Coming as a weapon of fear to convince the unconverted to convert before it is too late. For those who avoid the doctrine of the Second Coming, I suspect the fear is more personal – perhaps because the Biblical imagery is often so startling and strange (as in our passage this morning). A fear that somehow, someway, despite our profession of Christ, we are going to be among those “left behind.”

But what if the not yet of the Kingdom, as well as the promised Second Coming of Christ to bring His kingdom to fruition, is not supposed to inspire fear, but rather profound and life-shaping reassurance for those who already belong to King Jesus?

Let me explain. Even though the Kingdom of God is already in our midst, do we not also still behold so much that is still so very much not the way it is supposed to be – in our lives and in the life of this world? I got that line “not the way it is supposed to be” from an old movie from 1991 entitled “Grand Canyon.” In one scene, a young upwardly mobile professional in an expensive car (“Yuppie” we used to call them), tries to escape a traffic jam by taking what he thinks will be a shortcut. His shortcut, however, leads him into one of the most dangerous parts of town. And then, nightmare scenario, his car breaks down. He calls for a tow truck, but before it arrives he finds himself surrounded by several gang members threatening him with considerable harm. Just in time, the tow truck arrives; and the tow truck driver begins to hook up the car. The gang members protest – he is messing up their fun. So the tow truck driver, played by the wonderful Danny Glover, pulls the leader of the gang aside and says to him:

Man, the world ain't supposed to work like this. Maybe you don't know that, but this ain't the way it's supposed to be. I'm supposed to be able to do my job without askin' you if I can. And that dude is supposed to be able to wait with his car without you rippin' him off. Everything's supposed to be different than what it is here.⁸

Not the way it is supposed to be. Despite the now of the Kingdom of God, there is still so much in this world that is not the way it is supposed to be – or, let us say, not yet the way it is supposed to be. War – always and everywhere still human beings resort to violence at the smallest provocation. Famine – always and everywhere still people go hungry, children go hungry, even though so much food is thrown into the trash every day. Sickness – always and everywhere still people get sick and suffer. Death – always and everywhere still death comes in the end. War, Famine, Sickness, and Death – the fabled Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, which wreak havoc upon this world, even as they also wreak havoc upon what should be our rightful expectation of the Second Coming of Jesus.

But remember again what Jesus said back in Nazareth at the start. Remember again the list of the things He did during this time on earth. For what He told us, what He demonstrated to us, is that the Four Horsemen shall at last be overcome and defeated – indeed, shall be no more – when once He comes again. In place of war, Jesus brought about peace between God and us – a peace that shall one day fill all the earth. In place of famine, Jesus gave us His Body and Blood as a foretaste and promise of the day when He will welcome all His people into the eternal wedding feast of the Lamb. In place of sickness, Jesus healed wherever He went, promising us that one day He would make all things new and unfailing. And in place of death, Jesus brought us resurrection and the promise of a place prepared for us in the Father’s house forever. And that, that is what the Second Coming of Jesus is about – this not yet of the Kingdom of God. Jesus, when He comes again, is going to make everything the way it is supposed to be. All the bad stuff banished forever, and Jesus making everything right again, everything good again, everything beautiful forever. So not something to fear, but something to anticipate, to draw reassurance from – something to long for, to hope for, to work for, even to pray for:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.”⁹

The not yet of the Kingdom of God is God’s own promise to us that, in the end, everything is going to be made okay. Better than okay – everything is going to be made good, everything is going to be made the way it was always supposed to be. And that we, God’s people, will be there on that not yet day, to enter into His everlasting Kingdom, and to rest and to rejoice.

¹ Lines from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s poem, “Monadnock.” The full text can be found at www.bartleby.com/270/13/160.html.

² Eugene H. Peterson, Practice Resurrection (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), pp. 84-85.

³ Luke 4:16-21.

⁴ John 3:16.

⁵ John 13:34-35.

⁶ David McGrath, “My Dad and Mr. Zakowski,” Christian Science Monitor, Vol. 101, No. 95 (June 21, 2009), p. 44.

⁷ Philippians 2:10-11.

⁸ Quoted in Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 7.

⁹ Revelation 21:3-5.