

The Kingdom of Heaven Is Within and/or Among You

Like Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

October 18, 2020

Luke 17:20-21

Where were you on April 22, 1959? Obviously, that question is addressed to those of you who are of a “certain age.” If you were a member of the Davidian Seventh Day Adventists – the predecessor of the Branch Davidians – you and several hundred of your fellow cult members were gathered at the New Mount Carmel Center outside Waco waiting for the dawning of the messianic age.

I’m pretty sure that Jesus did not return. It would have been in all the papers.

I used to have a booklet—I have somehow misplaced it – titled, “88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988.” The author was more specific than that. He said the rapture would occur somewhere between “September 11 and September 13.” I don’t know why he didn’t nail it on September 12, since that is the only day between the 11th and the 13th. The booklet sold 4.5 million copies. And Jesus was a no-show again. Which led the author, Edgar Whisenant – who was a former NASA engineer – to publish a sequel. The title of the first chapter in the sequel was, “What went wrong in 1988.”

Whereas, in his earlier booklet he had been cockily sure of his prediction, this time the author hedged his bet. The title, “The Final Shout: Rapture Report 1989,” is followed by dates that become increasingly hard to read: 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993. You will not be surprised that there were subsequent predictions – and booklets – for 1993 and 1994.

This is not a new phenomenon. Some people were preoccupied with the end of the world, the coming of the Messiah, however it was framed, in the first century and before. Witness the book of the Revelation as well as parts of Daniel, some non-canonical Jewish books and passages in the Gospels, including one that follows our text.

Which brings us to our text -- Luke 17:20-21.

This is the Gospel of grace.

Thanks be to God.

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, “Look, here it is!” or “There it is!” For, in fact, the kingdom of God is. . . .’

If you grew up with the King James Version of the Bible as I did, that sentence ended with Jesus telling the Pharisees, “The kingdom of God is *within* you.”

But if, when you grew up, you bought a New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, as I did, he told them, “The kingdom of God is *among* you.”

I am neither a Greek scholar nor a son of one, but I have it on good authority that it could go either way. The small Greek word in question could legitimately be translated “within” or “among.” In fact, the editors of the NRSV inserted a footnote at the bottom of the page that says, in essence, we’ve got “among,” but it could be “within.”

We’re not quibbling over how many angels can dance on the head of a needle. There is a significant difference between those two renderings.

On one hand, the locus of the kingdom of God is in one's inner spiritual life. It is "within you." In the evangelical tradition one is to accept Jesus as one's personal savior and to have a personal relationship with him. The kingdom of God is the reign of God in one's innermost, deepest self. There is an obvious truth about that.

On the other hand, the kingdom of God is a social, corporate reality, external to the individual. It is "among you." Also true.

So, which is it?

You are going to expect me to say it's not either/or, it's both/and. Which is true, of course, but it's too easy.

The context suggests that in this instance – and I emphasize in this instance -- Jesus intended the latter. He was talking with a group of Pharisees, who are painted – fairly or unfairly -- in the Gospels as being his harshest critics. It isn't likely that he would have told them of all people that God's kingdom existed in their inner spiritual life, in their heart of hearts, as preachers like to say.

More than likely he said, "The kingdom of God is among you." That is where I want to focus our attention.

Jesus was responding to the expectation that God's kingdom would come on earth with great fanfare and flashes of glory that all could see and by which everyone would be convinced.

He responded in a way that I don't think we give enough thought to. I don't think I have ever heard a sermon preached on this verse. I know I have never preached one – until now. He said, *"The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed."* Think about that.

The kingdom is not coming with things that you can see, things that are so obvious and so unambiguous that there is no mistaking that they constitute God's righteous kingdom. You won't be able to say, *"Look, here it is!"* or *"There it is!"*

Jesus made the same point in different ways in various places in the Gospels.

On another occasion Jesus said that the kingdom is like a seed planted and germinating in the darkness beneath the surface of the soil. You can't see what is happening, if anything. You may even have forgotten that you planted it. But once planted it has a life of its own. Whether we know it or not, it's growing -- silently, mysteriously. (Mark 4:26-29) The kingdom of God is like that, Jesus said.

On yet another occasion, Jesus said that the kingdom is like a farmer whose workers report that an enemy must have come into his wheat field at night and planted grains that at an early stage are indistinguishable from wheat but will, if left alone, eventually choke the wheat that he planted. They ask his permission to pull up the grain planted by his enemies. The farmer tells them to wait until the plants are more fully grown when the good and the bad will be more easily distinguishable. Otherwise, he said, you might pull up the wrong one. (Matthew 13:24-30) The kingdom is like that, Jesus said.

Yet again, Jesus said that the kingdom is like yeast rising in dough before it is put into the oven. (Matthew 13:33). I want to spend a little more time here, because I have recently learned something that has turned my understanding of this parable upside down.

I have a recipe for bread that calls for two packets of yeast. Together two packets of yeast weigh half an ounce. When I read that the woman in Jesus' parable used three measures of flour in her bread, I thought "measures" was a general term like

measurement. It could mean a cup or two cups or whatever, depending on the recipe. I have recently learned that the Greek word that is translated “measure” had a definite meaning. The footnote in the NRSV translation of the Bible says that the three measures of flour that Jesus said the woman used to make bread would weigh about 50 pounds.

Fr. Dominic, aka the Bread Monk, says: “That’s a ridiculously large amount of flour---you’d need a 100-quart Hobart mixer with a dough hook as big as your leg to knead it!” He figures that three measures would be the equivalent of 144 cups of flour. To put that into perspective, he says that if we “used a common recipe for basic white bread that uses 5 ½ cups of flour, 144 cups is enough to make 26 batches of bread of two loaves each, giving us a total of 52 loaves. If we’re frugal but not stingy, we can get 16 slices out of a loaf, yielding 832 slices, enough for 416 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches (for which) we’d need 33 jars of jelly, and 64 (jars) of peanut butter.”

That’s a lot of bread. She wasn’t baking for her family. She was baking for the whole town. I suspect that if there were bakers in the audience that day, they burst out laughing, because it was such a ridiculous figure.

Jesus said the kingdom is like the yeast that leavens such an outrageous quantity of bread – working silently, mysteriously, out of sight, not subject to our control.

There is a subtlety and an ambiguity about the kingdom’s coming, Jesus said. A little faith is required to see its advent. Eyes to see.

But it is coming. It has come. Jesus speaks in the present tense. “The kingdom of God is among you.” It is among us. It is in the space between us, the space that both connects and separates us. That is where forgiveness happens. Not simply within us; between us. That is where reconciliation takes place. It is where justice is done. It is where prisoners are visited, the hungry fed, the thirsty given drink, the sick visited, and strangers welcomed. (Matthew 25:31-46) It is where good news is preached to the poor, release is proclaimed to the captives, sight is recovered by the blind, and the oppressed go free. (Luke 4: 18-19) It is where retaliation is rejected, and love is extended to enemies. (Matthew 6:38-45) It is where prodigals are welcomed home. (Luke 15:11-32)

It is where love is pressed against an assisted living window.

It is where a daughter reads a poem about her dad who died in police custody.

The Pharisees asked, “When is the kingdom of God coming?” Jesus answered, “Wrong question. Not when . . . where.”

Among us, in the space between us, that is where the kingdom comes.

Benediction

Our benediction is a familiar petition from the Lord’s Prayer: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done – on earth. Among us. In the space between us. Amen.