

“Thy Kingdom Come”
Sermon by Rev. Peter Shidemantle
Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church
November 6, 2011
Text – Matthew 25:1-13

“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” We pray it every Sunday, at least, as Christians have prayed it ever since Jesus taught his disciples how they should pray. Establish your rule, Lord, fulfill all things as you intend. Bring forth your kingdom. And ever since Christians have been praying it we have struggled with it. We’ve struggled with what it means, with what it looks like; we’ve struggled with who will be part of it, and who won’t – with who gets to go, with who gets left behind.

It’s only natural that it would make us a little nervous, even as we pray for God’s kingdom to come. If we pray for healing for ourselves or someone we love, we know what we are praying for. If we pray for peace, we know what it would look like if it came. But when we pray for God’s kingdom to come we don’t have any real basis in experience to be able to envision it. Jesus talked about the kingdom of God (heaven) a lot – it was the main theme of his ministry on earth. In his teachings and his parables, like this morning’s parable from Matthew’s gospel, he spoke of what the kingdom of God is “like” – not through literal description but through metaphor. We do, I believe, catch glimpses of the kingdom from time to time, when through eyes of faith we detect the glow of heaven around an earthly event, some sign that reminds us that there is more to life than what commonly meets the eye. But the kingdom of God is not yet here in its fullness: It is coming.

For the earliest Christians, who assumed that their generation would not pass on before the Lord would come again, this presented a kind of crisis of faith. What would happen to those who weren’t around any longer when Christ returned? The Apostle Paul addressed this concern with the Christians in Thessalonica, and drew on images that would

have been familiar to them. He used royal language to describe the second coming of Christ. When a king and his entourage came to a city, he would come up before the city walls and would be announced by a herald, who would blow a trumpet and proclaim who had arrived outside the city walls to the watchmen on the walls. At this point a reception committee would go out to meet the king and welcome him into the city, returning with him to the city gates.

This is the visual image that Paul conjures up for his audience, that Christ the king will return to earth with the deceased saints and the angels, and the living Christians will go forth into the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. After this both groups will return to the earthly city where Christ will judge and rule the earth.

This is not an image that strikes us as familiar today. With the passage of time the idea of Christ coming again has itself faded into the background for most Christians. To be sure, there have always been some for whom this image and a sense of the nearness of Christ's return has remained central, and periodically someone will name the date and time (as recently happened) and others will grab onto that hook, line and sinker – only to be disappointed or disillusioned when it hasn't happened. And the faith, I believe, suffers as a result, as certain persons have claimed to know much more than Christ himself claimed to know about these things.

It's easy to dismiss all of this as antiquated view that modern people are much too sophisticated to take seriously, as if the only truth in Scripture is what can be verified by our own experience or can be fit into our own world view. If we believe that God's word is revealed to us through the witness of the scriptures, and as we read through eyes of faith in the living God (which is how the scriptures are intended to be read), then our task is not to dismiss them outright if we don't agree or we can't relate – but to search them for the truth they do reveal. As I heard Old Testament scholar Phyllis Trible say at a conference of

preachers at Montreat in North Carolina back in 2000, where she was addressing the liberal versus conservative deadlocked battles that seem to keep people arguing about the Bible instead of plumbing its depths – “Do not abandon the Bible to the Bible-bashers and the Bible-thumpers. Reclaim the Bible. Do not let go of it until it blesses you.” That comment received a standing ovation from the 1,000 or so preachers who were there. Do not let go of it until it blesses you. Another way to say that, perhaps, is to not let go of it until it reveals its truth to you. And if scripture is to reveal its truth, it must speak to the truth of our own lives.

One of the truths about life in these days is how there is a sense of urgency about everything. Everyone’s in a hurry – we’re always trying to keep up or catch up. People speak to one another about how busy they are and how much of a struggle it is to hold everything together. To be delayed is about the worst thing that can happen – to be put on hold waiting to speak to a live customer-service representative, slowing down to 20 mph for a school zone, enduring a sluggish internet connection. . . . Delay frustrates those living in a fast-paced world. As a result we prize faster communication, travel, food, answers to prayer, money, weight loss, and advancement. When we do slow down it’s seldom to gain a perspective on what in fact all the rush is about. We just want to get away from it all – to “recharge,” we say – so we can take it all on again. But I’ve always been struck by what Martin Luther is reported to have said – that normally he would spend two hours a day in prayer, except for the really busy days, when he spent four hours in prayer.

From the biblical perspective, there is a sense of urgency about life, but it’s a different sort of urgency than we generally experience. Maybe the best way to say it is that as Christians we are called to take death seriously. This may seem paradoxical for a religion that is supposed to believe that life doesn’t end with physical death. After all, isn’t that what eternal life is all about? Yes, and no. Yes, eternal life is a basic Christian hope,

but no, this isn't all of what that hope is about.

Eternal life isn't just about where we're going – it's also about what God is bringing. It has been observed that when the early church had to adjust its hope of Christ's immediate return, the focus shifted to the hope of life beyond death. You can see how that might begin to take the juice out of a living hope, over time. Life is long when measured in time (for those granted a full complement of years). It is full of delays, delays that are forced on us, but also delays that we initiate. The things we know are important – the big things – we always think there will be time to address them, to deal with them. Our relationship to God tends to be one of them – a fuller life with God, a closer walk with Christ. We tend to procrastinate with those things that call upon and demand the most from us.

Some years ago I learned, through a physical exam, that my bad cholesterol was a bit high. It seems it's an inherited tendency – my younger brother and sister have both had to deal with it. I had always eaten pretty healthfully. I didn't really worry about it – and I do love eggs and cheese, and sausage. I try to take it easy with those foods now, trying to eat "lite." But I don't want to live a "Christianity Lite" kind of faith. I don't want to get just some part, some semblance of the real thing. I want the full taste of it. "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again," is the ancient Christian proclamation. Without the last part, the first two lose their full flavor, their full force. Without the last part, the really good stuff has already happened – and we are only receivers of services rendered, and not players in the ongoing story of salvation. We are more important than that. Each human being is more important than that.

We do experience the delay of Christ's coming again, but as people for whom he has already come. He has awakened in us a hope and a hunger for the fullness of God's kingdom to be revealed. It isn't here yet, and during the delay – however long or short in

time – Jesus counsels in his parable to be prepared for the delay, to be wise and not foolish about this. Foolish is to live as if there were no tomorrow, which means that when tomorrow comes you have nothing left to meet it. Foolish is to assume that if death is our end we should eat and drink and be merry without regard for those who don't have enough to eat or drink, and little reason to be merry, leaving the work of salvation to someone else. Or foolish is to live as if there were endless tomorrows, and to prepare for it by hoarding for yourself, as if your future can be secured by your own efforts, as if your life depended on yourself alone.

Instead, Jesus taught in his parable to be wise. Be wise by living in hope, the hope that the world and each one of us will one day be transformed and fully reconciled to God. The wise are prepared, not by gathering what you think you need to assure your future, but by unburdening yourself of all the needless things and needless concerns that only serve to weigh you down. The wise keep their light shining before others, continuing in community, study and prayer, doing deeds of mercy, offering forgiveness, and spreading justice and peace. With the Spirit's guidance the wise build into their lives the disciplines and habits of a lifetime that inspire hope in others and empower them to live as citizens of the kingdom of God.

Our only true hope lies in the God who is always coming toward us in love, inviting us now into the kingdom that is near. Some day it may be too late – but why should we care to live with God forever if we do not choose to live for God now? Wake up, wake up and see, wake up and feel the hunger that only God can fill, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

With deep hunger and great expectation let us pray together in the way that Jesus taught:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will

be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil; for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.