

Sermons at St Paul's

The Last Sunday after Pentecost

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Today is the last Sunday of the Church Year. The annual liturgical cycle will begin again next week, when we celebrate the First Sunday of Advent. We'll go from green vestments to purple ones for the next few weeks. We'll move from Lectionary Year A to Lectionary Year B, so instead of many of our gospel readings coming from Matthew, we'll move on to the Gospel of Mark.

This seems like a good time to ask how we have lived in the Kingdom of God this past year. We heard a lot of parables about the Kingdom – how it is like many different things. But we noticed that we never got a rock-solid definition of the mysterious Kingdom. So it is kind of hard to assess how well we have done. It may be that Jesus cannot tell us what the Kingdom of God is really like, because we are just not there yet. A traveler from a world with five dimensions could never exactly explain home to people living in three dimensions (or four, if you want to count time.)

Yet, with the help of the delicate instruments our physicists have invented and built, this past year gravitational waves were detected from the 130 million-year old collision of two neutron stars. In an eerie “live stream” on August 17th, scientists around the world were able to record nearly 100 seconds of the massive merging of these neutron stars and the resulting ripples in space-time just as they reached our planet. In the process, a theory that this is the source of our heavy metals, like gold and platinum, was at least partially confirmed.

That's a lot like the Kingdom of God descriptions we get from Jesus through the filter of 2,000 years. We have a theory – or belief – that there is rich treasure in the Kingdom of God, yet we need to have our eyes tuned to see it. We have to know how to listen to these Bible stories if we want to hear the space-time ripples that resulted when God became incarnate and changed our world forever.

Both our reading from Ezekiel today and our gospel reading from Matthew talk about the inversion of the normal mode. Ezekiel warns that God will intervene when the big powerful

sheep use their horns and shoulders to push the weaker sheep aside from good grazing land and water. When the flock is scattered, the shepherd will call it back together, protecting the weak and binding up the injured. And the strong will be made weak, as a new shepherd is anointed to watch over the flock and lead them.

In Matthew's gospel, we hear that the Son of Man will comfort the sheep of his flock because they have learned to protect the weak, and hungry and thirsty in his name. The sheep have learned this, and the goats do not get it – they are each out for themselves. While most of us do not have goats to tend nowadays, we get the image. It is in the nature of goats to forage alone, and the nature of sheep to stay in a flock. But at the same time we strain, to catch exactly what Jesus meant. We don't live in a pastoral economy, and those goats and sheep are not part of our daily lives, any more than are the 130 million year-old gravitational waves!

So where can we look for guidelines to judge how well we have lived into God's Kingdom this year? And how shall we prepare for the year ahead?

First of all, during the coming week we can read the entire gospel of Mark – it's not very long. That way, when we hear these little bits every Sunday, we will know how to put them in context. The Kingdom of God stories and parables in Matthew have become much more understandable when we know the circumstances of their telling. Even the odd bits, like the lines that closed the gospel reading last week: To those who have, more shall be given, and to those who have not, even what they have will be taken away. It would be easy to assume that the reference to *having*, has to do with the talents of gold. It is only when we see them in the Kingdom of God context, that we understand their import. Those who see the Kingdom of God around them, will see more and more of it; while those who don't or won't see the Kingdom, will, see less and less of God's grace, until finally there is only empty darkness.

Another thing we can do is take Jesus a bit literally. When he tells us that those who see and serve him in the poor, the hungry, the sick and imprisoned will have eternal life, it is because they see the Kingdom of God here on earth. Those who refuse to help, to feed, to welcome the stranger, are refusing to see the "least of these" as equal citizens of God's kingdom. And in the end by their refusal, they will separate themselves from God, who is love. What greater eternal punishment could there be, than being separated from love forever?

A third possibility for preparation is that we commit ourselves to deliberately practice seeing the Kingdom of God. The astrophysicists who recorded the gravitational waves in August

had practiced how they would record them when the moment came. They had set up their sensitive equipment, tested it and were waiting. As the tweets went out – here the waves come! – these scientists were like the wise young women who had oil in their lamps to welcome the bridegroom. They were prepared and ready, their computers already humming, and they knew how to record and interpret the data they received.

That’s what seeing and hearing the Kingdom of God is about. We have to practice. We have to know the gospels and the world Jesus knew.

“When did we see you hungry or thirsty?” the righteous ones say in this parable. The point is not that they saw the King, but that they saw need and filled that need.

Perhaps it helps to know that the word in Hebrew that is used for “righteous” can also mean “just.” The unrighteous ones, the unjust ones, did not see, and did not fill the needs of those around them. They were running on empty, and did not know it.

So for the next few weeks we can practice seeing the Kingdom of God, We can practice seeing all the needy and filling others’ needs and our own just needs. We can prepare for the next ancient gravitational wave to roll through time and space. And we can begin to prepare for our Christmas celebration of God’s incarnation, an event that changed the world 2,000 years ago.

Amen