

The Kingdom of God

Presented to Manoa Valley Church

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Good morning! Welcome to Manoa Valley Church and to this worship service. Whether you are on Zoom or here in the breezeway, whether you are a member or friend or visitor, you are most welcome. God loves you, we love you, and we are delighted to connect with you and worship the Lord together, especially during these very difficult times.

I would like to take a moment to introduce myself. My name is Kent Keith, and I have been a member of Manoa Valley Church since 1974. My wife and I were married here in 1976, and our children were baptized here in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The next most important thing I can tell you is that I graduated from Roosevelt High School. Actually, that's probably all you need to know. But here's a little more. Over the years, I have been an attorney, state government official, high tech park developer, YMCA executive, CEO of two nonprofit organizations, and president of two private religious universities here in Hawaii— Chaminade University and Pacific Rim Christian University. During my faith journey I have taken theology courses, I have read religious books, I have researched and written religious books, and I have listened to sermons. I have learned a lot by listening to Pastor Abe's sermons this past year. We are fortunate to have a pastor who is also a gifted teacher. I am eager to keep learning from Pastor Abe and others in the future. I just want to make it clear that I am not a Bible scholar, or a theologian, or a licensed minister. I am a Christian like you, a layman, trying to understand Scripture and God's will for my own life and the life of the body of Christ to which I belong.

Today and next Sunday, I will be sharing ideas that have been very important to me on my own faith journey. I share these ideas knowing that our faith journeys are not all the same, and our interpretations of Scripture may differ. I understand that you may not agree with what I will be sharing. That's okay. I will simply share with you what I see, by the light given me, in the hope that what I say may be useful to you in some way. I will be working from a text, so I won't forget

anything, and I will be quoting Bible scholars, since I am not a Bible scholar myself.

With that said, let's begin.

The central message of Jesus

I often wonder what it was like for the people who knew Jesus in the flesh, in Galilee and Jerusalem, two thousand years ago. I wonder what it was like for his disciples, and the people who heard him teach. What was it like for those who saw him heal the sick, and feed the hungry, and reach out to the outcast? If we were there, two thousand years ago, what would we have heard Jesus talk about the most? What did he most want us to understand? What was his most important message— his central message?

If you ask a group of Christians today, what was the central message of Jesus during his ministry, they might answer from John 14:6, when Jesus said: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Or they might answer: “I came to die for you, that you might have eternal life.”

Those are certainly important messages, but scholars would answer differently. They agree that the central message of Jesus was about the kingdom of God. According to *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, the Gospel of Mark contains 14 references to the “Kingdom of God;” the Gospel of Matthew has 38 references to the “Kingdom of Heaven/God” or its equivalents; and the term “kingdom” occurs 46 times in the Gospel of Luke and 8 times in the Acts of the Apostles. That totals 106 references in the Synoptic Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. That's a lot of references. It's pretty clear that Jesus talked about the kingdom of God more than anything else.

What is the kingdom of God?

If the kingdom of God is the central message of Jesus, what is it? The simple answer is that the kingdom of God is not like the world we live in. In fact, it is our world turned upside down.

This is foreshadowed in the words of Mary, when she met Elizabeth, before Jesus was born. Her words, found at Luke 1:51-53, are known as the Magnificat or Mary's Song. During her song, she says these things about what God is doing:

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
 he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
 but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
 but he has sent the rich away.

The proud are scattered, the rulers are dethroned, and the humble are lifted up. The hungry are fed, while the rich are dismissed. The social and political order are being turned upside down by God.

The foreshadowing continues at Luke 3:4-6, when John the Baptist announces the coming of Jesus. He uses words from Isaiah 40:3-5:

A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
 make straight paths for him.
Every valley shall be filled in,
 every mountain and hill made low.
The crooked roads shall become straight,
 the rough ways smooth.
And all people will see God’s salvation.

These are complete reversals. A valley that is filled in is no longer a valley; mountains and hills made low are no longer mountains and hills. The crooked becomes straight, the rough becomes smooth. Features of nature, physical things, are being turned into their opposite.

Jesus was first tested in the wilderness, and then he began his ministry, teaching in the synagogues. We learn from Luke 4:14-20 that he went to Nazareth, where he was raised. He went into the synagogue and stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. He found the place in Isaiah where it is written:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
 Because he has anointed me
 To proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
 And recovery of sight for the blind,

To set the oppressed free,
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Then he rolled up the scroll, sat down, and said: "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus began his ministry by describing his mission. He came to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, and liberty for the oppressed. He came to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. That has been interpreted to mean he was declaring a year of Jubilee, described in Leviticus 25.

A Jubilee year could occur every 50th year. It was a year in which the land was to lie fallow, Hebrew slaves were set free, hereditary lands that had been sold were returned to their original owners, and debts were forgiven. The idea was to re-set things to the year that Israel entered into the Promised Land, to restore the nation to the condition it had been in when God first established it. Jesus began his ministry by reading the passage in Isaiah that announces all these dramatic changes.

During his ministry, Jesus continued to make it clear that the kingdom of God is really different from the world we know. For example, rich people have high status and privileges in our world. But after his interaction with the rich young man, found at Luke 18:24-25, Jesus said: "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

In the beatitudes, at Luke 6:20, Jesus said "blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven." A few verses later, he said, "but woe to you who are rich." In the kingdom of God, the status hierarchy of rich and poor is turned upside down. The poor are blessed. The kingdom belongs to them, not to the rich.

At Matthew 21:31 the chief priests and elders are challenging Jesus in the temple courts. The priests and elders are people of high status, but Jesus tells them that tax collectors and prostitutes, people with the lowest status, are entering the kingdom of God ahead of them.

The whole idea of greatness is turned upside down. At Matthew 18:1-4, the disciples came to Jesus and asked him, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus called a little child to him and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you

change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” The social hierarchy of adult and child is turned upside down. The lowly are the greatest.

In the kingdom of God, leaders are not rulers who lord it over people. Instead, they are people who lead with a servant’s heart. At Matthew 20:25-28, Jesus told his disciples:

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

The roles of powerful ruler and humble servant are inverted.

In two of his parables, Jesus told us that the kingdom is so valuable that people will give up everything in order to get it. At Matthew 13:44-45, Jesus said:

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

The kingdom is more valuable than anything else.

The kingdom is not like our commercial or business world. It is radically generous. In the parable of the workers in the vineyard, found at Matthew 10:1-16, Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who hired workers early in the morning, and then more workers later in the morning, and then more workers at noon, and more at three in the afternoon, and more at five in the afternoon. He paid them all the same wage, even if they started late in the day. When those who started work earlier in the day grumbled about the wages paid those who worked later, the landowner pointed out that each had agreed to the amount they were paid, and he had the right to pay each of them the same. They should not be envious because he was generous to those who started work later. This parable is followed by the famous words of Jesus: “So the last will be first,

and the first will be last.” The order of things in our world is reversed in God’s kingdom. Radical generosity supersedes business as usual.

In another parable, found at Matthew 22:1-14, Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. When the invited guests did not come, he sent his servants out onto the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and filled the wedding hall with them. He extended his generosity to everyone, regardless of social status or connection. You just had to show up wearing wedding attire.

Summarizing the kingdom of God

If we stand back and think about everything Jesus said about the kingdom of God, how do we put it all together? Is it possible to summarize what the kingdom of God is about?

Years ago, I took a theology course from Dr. David Anderson at Chaminade University. Dr. Anderson listed five characteristics of the kingdom of God. First, the kingdom is for a worldwide community of caring and sharing, and is against the love of money or wealth for its own sake. Second, the kingdom is for recognizing the Godly value of people as people, and against false values such as prestige and status. Third, the kingdom is for universal, inclusive solidarity and against selfish solidarity (“us versus them”). Fourth, the kingdom is for servant power, the power of love, not the abusive power that oppresses or enslaves. Fifth, the kingdom is for subversive wisdom or alternative wisdom, not conventional wisdom. Kingdom people don’t fit into the world’s mold. The kingdom of God is the sinful world turned upside down.

Dr. David Flusser was an Israeli professor of early Christianity and Judaism. In his book, *Jesus*, Flusser summarizes the kingdom of God this way:

... God’s unconditional love for all becomes visible, and the barriers between sinner and righteous are shattered... the last become first, and the first become last. The poor, the hungry, the meek, the mourners, and the persecuted inherit the kingdom of heaven.

Dr. Donald Kraybill is a faculty member at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania. He has served as a pastor and leader with Mennonite and Church of the Brethren organizations. In his book, *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, Kraybill emphasizes the idea that Jesus was against hierarchies. Kraybill’s interpretation is

that Jesus did not just want to turn the hierarchical order upside down, trading one group at the top for another group at the top. Kraybill wrote:

Rather than exchanging a new hierarchy for an old one, Jesus flattens hierarchies... He calls us to participate in a flat kingdom where everyone is the greatest. In this kingdom the values of service and compassion replace dominance and command. In this flat family, the greatest are those who teach and do the commandments of God (Matt. 5:19). They love God and others as much as themselves.

In the kingdom of God, people may have different talents and roles, but they can all work together to achieve kingdom purposes. Hierarchies can be minimal, because the focus is not on who has power and control. The focus is on the kingdom work that needs to be done.

Missionary Stacy Rinehart, in his book *Upside Down: The Paradox of Servant Leadership*, describes this kind of flattened hierarchy in these words:

While each member of the family of Christ has his or her specific roles to play in accomplishing kingdom purposes, the relationships among its members are critically important. Those relationships do not emphasize rank. Instead, we stand shoulder to shoulder, mutually supporting and deferring to one another. We step up to make our contribution and then step back into our place to encourage and applaud the contribution of others.

Everyone has a role; everyone has a place; everyone can make the contribution she or he is gifted to make. It's not a hierarchy, it's a network— a network of love, service, and mutual respect.

Dr. Marcus J. Borg was an American New Testament scholar and theologian, known as a progressive Christian. In his book, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*, he said that the phrase 'kingdom of God' names God's passion for the earth— God's will, God's promise, God's dream. Borg said that there are three points about the kingdom of God on which most scholars agree: (1) God's kingdom was for the earth, not heaven; (2) God's kingdom referred to what life would be like if God were Lord and the domination systems of the world no longer existed; and (3) the kingdom of God was a transformed world, a blessed world, a utopia, "God's dream for the earth."

These descriptions of the kingdom of God make it clear that the world we are living in now is *not* the world that God wants for us. He does not want us to suffer the pain and sorrow, the war and disease, the oppression and injustice that are so prevalent in the world in which we live today. God wants something much better for us. We are his children. He loves us and wants us to live in a better place— his kingdom.

Personally, I imagine the kingdom of God to be a place in which people love and serve each other. It is a place in which people share what they have with those in need, so everyone has enough food, clothing, and shelter. I imagine the kingdom to be a place in which people are physically and spiritually healthy; a place of mutual respect and enjoyment of individual differences; a place of laughter and generosity, a place in which it is natural to come together to sing, and dance, and glorify the Lord. In short, I imagine the kingdom of God to be a place of extraordinary joy. It is a place in which we are finally the people who God always intended us to be.

All of these descriptions may sound like heaven, which we can only experience in the afterlife. But Jesus taught us to pray, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven.” Scholars agree that the kingdom of God is for earth. We might say it is about heaven on earth.

When will the kingdom come?

So, Bible scholars agree that the kingdom of God is the central message of Jesus, and they agree that the kingdom is for earth. However, they disagree on two specific issues. The first is *when* the kingdom of God will come.

Some point out that Jesus referred to the kingdom as though it was already breaking into our world. Others argue that the kingdom will come later, through human collaboration with God. According to the *Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*:

The tension between the present (‘already now’) and future (‘not yet’) aspects of the kingdom has been reflected in almost every period of Christian history... The point at issue is whether individual Christians might work toward the coming of the kingdom, or whether it remains wholly in God’s hands as a gift of grace.

The difference in these views, of course, has a practical impact on the lives of Christians. Is God just going to make it happen in the near future, or do we have a role in helping to make it happen later?

I do not believe that we have to choose between the kingdom of God being either “already now” or “not yet.” I agree with Bible scholars who believe that the kingdom of God is *both* now and later. It has begun, but it is not finished. Jesus came and brought the kingdom of God to us in person. Since then, the kingdom of God has been growing, but has not yet spread throughout the earth.

I believe that this is consistent with statements made by Jesus. We learn from Matthew 4:17 that after John the Baptist was put in prison, Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” A similar passage is found in Mark 1:14-15. After John the Baptist was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” Then he began calling his first disciples.

Dr. Mark Allen Powell was a professor of New Testament at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Ohio. In his book, *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels*, he referred to this passage in Mark. He said that when Jesus announced that the time is fulfilled and the reign of God has come near, “this means that the time has finally come for God’s will to be accomplished. What God wants to happen is about to take place; indeed, it is already beginning to happen.” Because the reign of God has drawn near, people can “enter it” by believing the good news proclaimed by Jesus and by living in ways consistent with that good news. “Ultimately,” Powell says, “Mark wants to say not only that God’s reign has drawn near, but that it has drawn near *in Jesus*. It is Jesus himself who brings about the accomplishment of God’s will, and he does this not only through his teaching and his miracles but, most important, through his crucifixion.”

This is consistent with Luke 17:20-21. When the Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied: “The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is in your midst.” Other translations are that “the kingdom of God is among you” or “the kingdom of God is within you.” This sounds like the kingdom is now, already here, not something that will come later.

Dr. David Flusser, in his book, *Jesus*, argues that with the arrival of Jesus, the new age of salvation has already begun, and is expanding among the people. Flusser describes the kingdom as a divinely willed movement. Jesus started the movement, and some people were already in the kingdom. So the kingdom is both “now” and “not yet.” It has started, and is spreading, but has not yet spread throughout the earth.

Kingdom or reign of God?

The second issue that scholars do not agree on is the translation of the underlying Greek words. Is the correct translation “the kingdom of God,” or “the reign of God?” The word “kingdom” seems to relate to a geographical location or a governmental organization, while the word “reign” seems to relate to a presence, a relationship, or an activity.

While “the reign of God” and “the kingdom of God” are alternate translations of the same underlying Greek word, the most important thing to remember is that Jesus is King. He is the king of his kingdom, and he reigns in his kingdom. When we focus on Jesus, we see that these alternate translations are simply two ways of explaining the all-important role of Jesus.

I like to think of the two translations in sequence— first the reign, then the kingdom. It makes sense to me that the *reign* of God will come first, because it is about our relationship with Christ. Christ must first reign in our hearts and the hearts of others. This is one reason that the Great Commission is so important. At Matthew 28:18-20, we read:

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

As we go and make disciples, we will increase the number of people who have entered into the *reign* of God and can join together to build the *kingdom* of God. That is what I believe we are all supposed to do as followers of Christ. We are here to spread the Gospel and grow the kingdom of God on earth.

But what, specifically, are we called to do? What is the role of the body of Christ at Manoa Valley Church in growing the kingdom of God? Those are the questions that we will be talking about next Sunday.

Please join me, now, in the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray.

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be 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 trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory, forever.
Amen.