

Luke 17:20-25

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 among you."

Then he said to the disciples, "The days are coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. They will say to you, 'Look there!' or 'Look here!' Do not go, do not set off in pursuit. For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. But first he must endure much suffering and be rejected by this generation."

Good morning!

Our scripture passage that Daniel and Timmo read - what an unsettling experience that must have been for Jesus' followers... To be living under Roman occupation, to be dealing with powerful and corrupt political powers, longing for a future king and kingdom - something better, more meaningful, and more impactful - and to be told that this new Kingdom isn't coming. In fact, it's already here.

I found myself thinking about that message to the disciples, as it relates to our current reality this week - both nationally and globally. With ongoing warfare in the Ukraine, conflict in Sudan and the Congo, not to mention continued airstrikes in Gaza, it's hard not to be weighed down with feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Here in the USA we see another summer with alarming climate disasters, economic challenges, and political division - perhaps at its pinnacle with yesterday's shocking news of a shooting at a political rally, heightening our ongoing anxiety about November's presidential election.

It's true, there is a deep longing in many of us for something better to emerge than the unfolding future. We long for MLK's words to be true - that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. Perhaps we're not living under Roman occupation, but we do have a sense that there are real challenges facing our society today. So how might we hear this scripture if it were told to us again this morning?

Our scripture this morning (SLIDE) says the kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."

Among us? Hmm...

If this is true, it feels crucial to take note when we sense little glimmers of this unfolding Kingdom in our midst. Like those glow sticks that Meredith showed us... how might we catch glimpses of that light that is in our midst?

It's been helpful for me to journey with you during this summer series here at UMC, as we hear from each other about the people who have influenced our faith, just as we heard from Kathleen this morning, as well as sharing sermons of the voices who have influenced us along the way. Last Sunday Pastor Kate helped remind us of the power of art - perhaps you experienced some glimmers of the kingdom as you wandered through the new Palmer Art Museum, or through the vendors at ArtsFest or People's Choice festivals this week.

Perhaps you notice the Kingdom when you move through nature, or when something speaks to you from a good book or a passage from scripture.

The Kingdom of God is among us.

I've often said I'm not sure I could be a Christian on a desert island. I need to be surrounded by a community of believers that help shape my faith and guide me by their examples. In a vacuum or on my own, I have a tendency to overthink, or let my own skepticism or doubt take over. I need to be able to ask questions and explore with others who are struggling with what it means to follow Christ.

And I need examples of those who have had a similar kind of journey.

Rachel Held Evans is one of those examples for me. She was an author and speaker who deeply shaped my faith. I think my first memory of her was hearing about her second book, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood* (SLIDE) that came out during my time as a youth pastor in 2012. In its pages Rachel explored and relayed the challenges and humorous stories of her attempt to live according to a legalistic reading of scripture, including covering her head during prayer, and calling her husband master. In its pages I found a powerful narrative of her journey to make sense of a biblical text that was both life-giving and frustrating.

Rachel had the ability to weave humor in with annoyance, sarcasm in with reverence, all the while blending a passion and commitment to scripture even when it didn't seem to make much sense. Her writing felt like sitting down with an old friend, and she invited her readers to share in the journey and experience with an intimacy I had rarely experienced in other theological texts.

It wasn't long after finishing that book that I ordered her first book, (SLIDE) a memoir focusing on growing as a conservative evangelical in Tennessee in the same town as the historic Scopes Monkey Trials, famous for arguments about creation versus evolution. It provided my own faith transition and journey from my own more conservative upbringing to becoming a more progressive and justice-minded minister with context and perspective. It reminded me that we were all on a journey, from wherever we begin, to wherever we are now. Rachel seemed to give permission to her reader to change. But also to share in occasional frustration with church tradition and evaluate spaces that are in need of change. She also invited her readers to examine a better way of engaging Christian faith and spirituality. To wrestle, yet remain rooted and committed to something deeper.

Rachel's next book, *Searching for Sunday*, (SLIDE) looked at church as a whole. Again, with the weightiness of our ongoing reality as slightly messy church people, but also finding glimmers of the kingdom amid its pages. Here's a short segment from that book, read by Rachel herself, about being drawn to the table.

SHOW VIDEO

A few years ago I finally got to meet Rachel in person when 3rd Way Collective, our campus ministry at the time, co-hosted her visit to Penn State.

SHOW IMAGE

I ended up with the task of picking her up from the airport. I remember texting a few friends, hardly believing I was going to actually meet her face to face. Minutes into our short drive she was cracking jokes about how hard it is to keep cars clean when you have kids making Cheerio dust, and asking deep questions about my work and my personal call to campus ministry.

She spoke clearly about her own need to find personal time in her unique kind of ministry, and how she had been learning to set boundaries that provided her and her family with space to rest. I was amazed by her ability to make people feel valued almost instantly, and her presence made even a 15-minute car ride from the airport to campus feel like sacred space.

In April of 2019, less than two years after her visit to our community, Rachel was placed in a medically induced coma following a severe allergic reaction to a medication for an

infection. By May 2, severe swelling of the brain worsened her condition, and she died on May 4.

It's fair to say that Rachel's example and witness had a profound impact on my faith, my work, and my sense of spiritual journey. She had the ability to nudge faith spaces built on certainty into permission to ask big questions, and to explore what it means to doubt.

She was also gifted in reminding us about the Kingdom of God. Her fourth book was nearing publication when she visited us here in State College. In the pages of *Inspired*, she outlines how to move beyond frustration with scripture to fall in love again with the complicated and beautiful pages of the biblical narrative. In her chapter on Gospel stories she digs into Kingdom imagery, and explains this way...

"The kingdom, Jesus taught, is right here--present yet hidden, immanent yet transcendent. It is at hand--among us and beyond us, now and not-yet. The kingdom of heaven, Jesus said, belongs to the poor, the meek, the peacemakers, the merciful, and those who hunger and thirst for God. It advances not through power and might, but through missions of mercy, kindness, and humility. In this kingdom, many who are last will be first and many who are first will be last. The rich don't usually get it, Jesus said, but children always do. This is a kingdom whose savior arrives not on a warhorse, but a donkey, not through triumph and conquest, but through death and resurrection. This kingdom is the only kingdom that will last."

Rachel understood how to make scripture applicable for our time. She had the courage to address injustice, and reminded those who cared to listen that there was something valuable about working for change within our traditions with a lot of baggage.

In that same book she continued...

What I love about the Bible is that the story isn't over. There are still prophets in our midst. There are still dragons and beasts. It might not look like it, but the Resistance is winning. The light is breaking through. So listen to the weirdos. Listen to the voices crying from the wilderness. They are pointing us to a new King and a better kingdom."

I find this so deeply empowering in a world that feels so chaotic.

Despite the weightiness of this moment, I feel the Kingdom when I hear about projects to reforest damaged land, creative ways to pull trash from the oceans, or reintroduce animals to their former habitats. I feel it when I notice those who work or volunteer to

help those who are healing or struggling, or just in need of a friend. I sense it when I notice people who are working for peace amidst a world that still has too much warfare.

I hope you feel it too.

“The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.”

May it be so. Amen.