

Title: Kingdom Grace

Text: 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:26-38

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The theme that connects the Old Testament reading and the Gospel reading is the promise of kingdom. Yahweh makes an unconditional promise with the house of David that his kingdom will endure forever. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann comments that the text contains both high theology and self-serving ideology, a theology of unconditional love intertwined with royal propaganda tended to give legitimacy to the Davidic dynasty. This reminds us that the truth comes to us wrapped in the human condition, mixed with human bias and fallibility. Brueggemann points out also that this text forms the taproot of the messianic idea in Israel. This is where the notion of a messianic deliverer first emerges. And this is why Luke makes reference to it in the annunciation to Mary because the child conceived by the Spirit is to be Israel's Messiah and the world's Savior. The angel says to Mary: "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

Jesus appears in the Gospel narrative proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. At Capernaum when the people tried to keep him from leaving he says, "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent."

As we follow the story in Luke, what we soon realize is that the kingdom proclaimed and embodied in the words and deeds of Jesus is not the same as David's kingdom. God's new world is no mere continuation of what began with David and it is vastly different than the kingdoms which constitute the empires and domination systems of the world.

One of the unique features of God's new world comes into play in the choice of Mary to bear the Christ child. Mary is not chosen because she is special; she is special because she is chosen. The angel says: "Mary, you have found favor with God." She responds in faithful obedience. She says: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me according to your word." But it is not her obedience that commended her to God; that was not why she found favor with God. She was not chosen because of who she was, or what she did, or what she would do. She is chosen, a young peasant girl, but not according to any human standard of worthiness.

Jesus incorporates this same pattern in his ministry. Jesus initiates the action. Jesus reaches out to "sinners." He joins them in table fellowship and lavishes God's forgiveness and grace upon them. In the home of Levi, the tax collector, who becomes a disciple, Jesus eats with a large crowd of tax collectors and other sinners who are despised and rejected by the

religious establishment. Some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law complain to Jesus' disciples about this, considering Jesus' eating with sinners to be an irreverent, despicable disregard for the Torah. Jesus' responds saying: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Make no mistake—Jesus called for conversion. Jesus preached repentance. But first he lavished the guilty with grace. Jesus accepted them. Jesus' table fellowship with sinners became a poignant and powerful symbol of God's new world. Jesus accepts them, embraces them, and welcomes them and once they have experienced grace he then calls them to embrace God's dream, God's vision for a new world. He bestows grace then he calls them to repentance, to change the direction of their lives, to no longer live for self, to die to their ego, to change the way they think, and live in the power and reality of God's dominion.

Last week I alluded to the difference between John's approach and Jesus' approach, and I said that John's message seemed to evoke a sense of fear. I do not want to disparage John's message because there is a time and place for a sense of fear. It may be that one might have to fear God before one can love God, or before one can experience God's love.

A man who is a wife abuser may first need a healthy dose of fear—of what the consequences will be for him if the abuse doesn't cease. Perhaps it is necessary that he experience the consequences. But the fear that is necessary to get him to stop abusing his wife is not likely to inspire him to love his wife. Some deeper change, a deeper conversion has to occur in order to inspire love that seeks the good in the other. But as a temporary measure fear has some value.

I suspect that John the Baptizer felt justified in his approach, justified in evoking a holy fear, because he believed that the Divine Clean-up, the purging fire of God was ready to fall.

But Jesus was more concerned that "sinners," those who felt the weight of guilt already, those who already felt the condemnation of God from the religious community that judged them and rejected them, that they experience the grace and love of God. The religious community had already pronounced them "no good"; they had already declared them to be under the wrath of God. They needed a word of grace. So Jesus went among the poor, the outcasts, the marginalized, those declared to be impure and unclean by the religious establishment, Jesus went among them and demonstrated God's acceptance and hospitality.

The promise that came to David in 2 Samuel, regarding his house and his kingdom, contained no "if" clause. In other words, there is nothing that would cause God to terminate the commitment and promise God made with him and his descendants. That is

not to say that there would not be sanctions or punishments, but they would not be terminal. The promise was unconditional. And this is the kind of acceptance and love that Jesus mediated and expressed to the poor “sinners” of Israel. Jesus pronounced God’s unconditional love upon them. Then Jesus called them to repentance, to conversion, to reorient their lives in view of God’s new world.

Unfortunately, the church at large has not done very well reflecting Jesus’ grace and acceptance. Philip Yancey in his book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, shares a story that a friend told him. His friend works with the down-and-out in Chicago. A prostitute came to him in wretched straights, homeless, sick, unable to buy food for her two-year-old daughter. Through sobs and tears, she told this heart wrenching story, about how she had been renting out her two-year-old baby girl to men wanting kinky sex. She made more renting out her daughter in one hour than she could earn on her own in a night. She had to do it, she said, to support her drug habit. Yancey’s friend could hardly bear to hear the sordid details and he had to legally report the child abuse. He asked her though if she ever considered going to a church for help. He said, “I will never forget the look of pure, naïve shock that crossed her face. ‘Church,’ she cried, ‘why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They’d just make me feel worse.’”

Certainly this woman needed to be reported and her child taken from her and placed in a safe, loving environment, but did she need to hear how bad she was? She already knew that. She didn’t need anymore judgment, she needed grace, she needed acceptance and then she needed access to the medical, psychological, economical, and spiritual resources that could empower her to break free from her addiction and change. But she didn’t need anymore condemnation; she needed grace.

What we see in the Gospels is that the worst people felt about themselves the more likely they would see Jesus as a refuge, a source of hope. In a scene from the movie, *Ironweed*, the characters played by Meryl Streep and Jack Nicholson stumble across an old Eskimo woman lying in the snow, probably drunk. Sort of dizzy themselves the two debate what they should do about her. “Is she drunk or a bum?” asks Nicholson. “Just a bum. Been one all her life,” came the response. “And before that?” “She was a whore in Alaska.” “She hasn’t been a whore all her life. Before that?” “I dunno,” says Streep, “Just a little kid, I guess.” “Well, a little kid’s something. It’s not a bum and it’s not a whore. It’s something. Let’s take her in.” I think Jesus had the capacity to see all people, no matter how bad or evil, as persons created in God’s image. No matter how defaced and marred that image had become Jesus could envision what that person could be. Jesus viewed all people as children of God.

The Swiss doctor Paul Tournier, a man of great personal faith, in his book *Guilt and Grace*, admits: “I cannot study this very serious problem of guilt without raising the very

obvious and tragic fact that religion—my own as well as that of all believers—can crush instead of liberate.”

Yancey tells about a friend of his who had recently divorced. She was standing in the sanctuary after a worship service with her 15-year-old daughter. The wife of a church leader came up to her and said harshly, “I hear you are divorcing. What I can’t understand is that if you love Jesus and he loves Jesus, why are you doing that?” This woman had never really talked to her before. She didn’t know their story. The woman told Yancey, “The pain of it was that my husband and I both did love Jesus, but the marriage was broken beyond mending. If she had just put her arms around me and said, ‘I’m so sorry . . .’” Mark Twain use to talk about people who were “good in the worst sense of the word.” Unfortunately, a lot of Christians fit Twain’s characterization. These Christians do not reflect the Jesus of the Gospels.

As I reflect on this annunciation story I think of Paul’s words to the church of Corinth, a church divided and splintered out of arrogance and pride. Paul wrote: “Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong; God chose the lowly things of the world and despised things . . . so that no one may boast” (1:26-29).

God seems to work best in those who know and confess their need, their emptiness, and their lostness. Later, in this Gospel, Jesus says: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh” (Luke 6:20-21).

Jesus seems to radically alter our definition of being “blessed” doesn’t he? How often do we say, “I feel so blessed.” And we certainly mean it. We do feel blessed don’t we? When we think about all that we have, all the advantages of education, vocation, freedom, and opportunities—we do feel “blessed.” But what if Jesus is right? What if the truly blessed ones are the poor, the hungry, and the destitute? That’s what Jesus says isn’t it? Jesus anticipates a great reversal when God’s new world is realized: the first shall be last and the last. The world as we know it will be flipped upside down and reversed inside out. Isn’t that what Mary says in her song of praise? “God fills the hungry with good things, but sends the rich away empty. God scatters the proud and brings down the arrogant, but lifts up the humble”

We feel blessed, but maybe we are not really the blessed ones. Mary and Joseph had very little of this world’s goods. They were not “blessed” with all the stuff we have, all the advantages and opportunities, and Mary’s child would end up on a Roman cross executed by the imperial power in charge, and Mary’s heart would be pieced with sorrow as the old

prophet Simeon tells her later in the story. But the angel says to Mary, “You have found favor with God.” May we all know something of “God’s favor.”

O God, perhaps it is true that we don’t know what it means to be “blessed” because our priorities and values are not your priorities and values. We are so easily influenced and shaped by the powers-that-be and the self-serving forces at work in our culture and in our lives. May we be given new insights and awareness of what your new world will be like so that we can work with you and not against you, so that we can be your agents and emissaries, sharing your grace and acceptance with others.

May each of us today experience some sense that we are not stranded in the universe, that we are not alone in the world, but that you care for us and accept us. We need the assurance that we are not deserted or abandoned, but that you are with us. Grant to us, our good God, a fresh experience and encounter with your grace right now, that we may be confident and assured that you love us. And then let us be changed by that love and be followers of Jesus Christ. For it is in his name, the name of our Savior, we pray, Amen.