



KINGDOM EPIPHANIES

The Paradox: Found & Finding

January 7, 2024

SONG #1 – Come Behold the Wondrous Mystery

WELCOME (cards & community) |

Good morning, all! I'm so glad we can gather together this morning as the church. Church is more than events like this, though we value such times together. Church is more than the programs and practices that help us follow Jesus, as invaluable as such aids have proven to be. No, church, as our scriptures tell it and our Savior establishes it, is a community, a people who, together, as spiritual companions in gospel communities, are following him, not just for their personal faith but for the perfecting (making whole and holy) all the world, which includes our daily lives, careers, callings, siblings, spouses, the needy and the neighbor. To be the church, that's the aim of our worship together, to set our mind's attention and hearts' affections upon Jesus so that we might follow him together through the ups and downs of our Father's kingdom come and will being done in the ordinary days between this one. And **so we come together, on this day of rest, to remember whose and who we are in Jesus.**

So, for those new with us, we are glad you're here, and we'd like to invite you to church into the relationships that make the church truly the body of Jesus. **CARDS**

PRAYING FOR DYLAN

Today is a special day for our faith family. Not because our gathering time changed, that's good, but because today officially begins Dylan's pastoral residency! Dylan and Alyson have committed to spending the next several years with our faith family, serving us and helping us grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus as we serve them by preparing Dylan for his lifelong vocation of pastoring.

Dylan and Alyson, will you join me up here? For a few moments, I'd like us to pray for the Fitzgeralds. For their labor and training ahead, for their marriage, their souls, and their joy. You're welcome to join in laying hands on them or can pray from your seat. Either way, after a few moments of praying for them together, Ryan Kernes, one of our elders, will voice a prayer for them for all of us before we continue in worship together.

CALL TO WORSHIP | Psalm 78:1-4

Listen, dear friends, to God's truth, bend your ears to what I tell you. I'm chewing on the morsel of a parable; I'll let you in on the sweet old truths, stories we heard from our fathers, counsel we learned at our mother's knee. We're not keeping this to ourselves, we're passing it along to the next generation— God's fame and fortune, the marvelous things he has done.

SONG #2 – For All That You've Done by Rend Collective

Dismiss Kids

CALL BACK & ANNOUNCEMENTS | [Commitment Cards & Epiphany Intro](#)

I wanted to remind you of something as you head back to your seats. For those who are part of our faith family, we asked you to help our family steward our resources and responsibilities by filling out a 2024 Giving Commitment Card. You can find those cards, which include a copy to turn in and to keep along with an overview of 2024 budget needs and plans. If you have not done so already, **please take a card, take it home, pray, listen to the Spirit's leading, and respond by bringing your card back next week to turn in.** I trust the Lord for what we need, and trust you to listen and respond to Him as He leads. If you have any questions please don't hesitate to ask.

Speaking of need, provision, and gifts; yesterday marked **the beginning of the Season of Epiphany.** A time in the church calendar when Jesus' people turn from celebration and wonder of what has been given, and look to living in the light which is the life of humanity. For us, we've made the habit of beginning this new year's tradition by letting the stories of Jesus enlighten us to the life we have been gifted by his life, death and resurrection. Parables, as we know them, are epiphanies, stories that reveal the reality of God with us and God for us, neighbors, and even enemies. Stories told with the intent to help us enter, get in on, and experience in fullness life with God, his kingdom arrived within grasp.

We asked Catherine to re-tell us the first Kingdom Epiphanies to begin 2024.

PRE-SERMON READING | Luke 15:1-10

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." "Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

SERMON | Found & Finding

Times up! God's kingdom is here. Change your life (repent) and believe the Message, the good news. (Mark 1:15)

Mark begins his gospel, "good news," account in a unique fashion. There are no preludes, no backstories; he jumps right into God-With-Us; Emmanuel arrived and doing the work of his prepared and enlightening purpose. Like Mark, we find our stories of anticipation have been told; now it's time to get in on the story's continued unfolding! Epiphany! The light of the world turned on and revealed; the light that is the life of humanity arrived and moved into the neighborhood. We've seen it, seen the glorious wonders of God with us and God for us...so let's live as if the Kingdom of God is here, in our midst, lighting our way through life today and tomorrow, in every detail of living.

That's what parables are meant to help us do, to awaken our imagination (our faith) to see beyond the statistics and news reports of the ills of the day and evil's supposed victories, and see that God's kingdom has come and his will is being done here and now, in our daily living, in our struggles, in our marriages, our work and workplaces, in our weakness, in our friendships, in our witnessing, our serving, our sharing, our worship.

And yet there is a tension of living in the Kingdom, God-With-Us, God-For-Us, God moving history, ours, and neighbors (local and global) towards His good purposes; **it doesn't arrive in the fashion we've imagined.** Just as Jesus arrived in a manner that most missed! So, we need more stories, this time, stories that cut through our expectations and desires (good and bad) of life full and forever, and get us in on the truth that Time is indeed up...or, as we ended our Christmas Eve Gathering reporting,

The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins...each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace. (1 Peter 4:7-10)

These are the days we find ourselves. At the end's beginning, loved and gifted and called to put to use both. Still, there is that tension of already but not yet that we all feel. The poem aptly titled "The Kingdom," by R.S. Thorton,¹ captures the tension we feel living life with God,

THE KINGDOM

It's a long way off but inside it
There are entirely different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed: mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves, and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It's a long way off, **but to get**
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.

¹ Quoted in Malcolm Guite, *Lifting the Veil: imagination and the kingdom of God*, 80.

Far off, yet happening, strangely enough. A world different in structure, form, and function. The poor man as king (the first last and the last first). The consumptive (the physically ill and those sick because of overconsumption) healed of what drains life. The blind seeing and recognizing love looking back. Industry (daily labor) that mends rather than merely produces or survives, or destroys. Such a life does seem far off at times, doesn't it!?

Far off, and yet it takes no time to get there, says the poet and Jesus. Not only is it nearer than we feel, but there is no cost for admission. Still, such a life might just cost us everything we can imagine: our desire purged (made true, removing all the dross, those crusty longings, and cravings that would keep us from the best within), our neediness exposed and embraced rather than dismissed or strategized, faith *offered* not merely kept personal and hidden. Life with God is "A condition of complete simplicity (our natural state)/Costing not less than everything,"² as one other poet put it.

This season of Epiphany, we'll be looking at **the paradox of life with God**, life where God is for us, where the end is beginning, and we are beginning anew; a paradox in which the Kingdom is where we are found (our true/natural selves), and also what we go finding (giving everything in living our true selves). "the paradox that the Kingdom itself: on the one hand it is a sheer gift, sheer grace, all achieved *for* us...achieved *in* us by Christ...on the other hand to find it, to recognize and yearn for it, is to let go of everything else."³ As one pastor put it.

Jesus' stories in Luke⁴ get us started in recognizing, feeling, and responding to this paradox. Let me read them again to us. But before I do, I want us to consider a couple of things:

- **Who are we as listeners?** Are we the scribes and Pharisees, the ones who, by all outward accounts (and some inward, as the scriptures tell us), are insiders to the Kingdom? Ones who think we know what to expect with God but are unsettled by God actually with us. Or are we the tax collectors and sinners whose daily living is less than Kingdom-oriented? Are we outsiders to life with God, finding obstacles (internally and externally) always in our way of getting in on what we desire and need?
- **Who are we as characters in the story?** Let me tell you who we are not. We are not the shepherd nor the woman. Some have argued that we could be the friends and community celebrating the finding, though that seems reserved for the heavenly present. Regardless, we are not the finders. In truth, we are the sheep or the coins. The 99 or 9 already found or the one lost—those who have found themselves separated from the shepherd, maybe intentionally or perhaps by accident (unattentive to the flock moving on or gone off wandering and unsure the way back) or those who have found themselves buried by life, under the rug or the dust, lost of purpose and use. So, who are we in the story?

² T.S. Elliot, "Little Gidding," in *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, 200.

³ Guite, 87.

⁴ You can find a more detailed exegesis of these parables [here](#).

With those two questions in mind, **ask the Holy Spirit to help you see yourself in the stories, then listen.** Listen to the words and the still, small voice as the words are read. After, we'll have a minute of silence for you to keep listening.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:1-10)

[1 Minute of Quiet]

Okay, one last reading. This time, just the stories themselves. And this time, knowing who you are in the story, **listen for the paradox, the irony in the stories.** Jesus says life with God, God for us, God with us, God at work, is like being lost and found. **It's not a conversion so much as a return to what/where you've always been.** And, here is the deeper layer of irony, life with God is not only more like a return to your true self (purpose and use) and community, being found is equated with *repenting*—which is an act of turning, of returning. Usually we think of repenting as an us act, but these stories broaden the action. Just think about it, how does the sheep return? Or the coin? **How do these stories describe the actors and actions in repenting?** Of changing your life since the time is up?

With those questions in mind, **ask the Holy Spirit to help you see how the kingdom finds us and where being found begins.** Listen to the words, and to the still small voice as the words are read. After, we'll have a minute of silence for you to keep listening.

"What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:4-10)

[1 Minute of Silence]

What is required of the sheep and the coin to be found? It seems like the only requirement is to be lost, separated from family and flock, from usefulness; the ability to contribute is hidden away. In other words, **it seems like the requirement was simply the need for a return to our true place and purpose.** Remember what Thorton reported in his poem about the Kingdom,

It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.

It seems like beginning in the Kingdom of God is a return to whose and who we are—an assurance of what is hoped (that indeed God is with us and for us) and a conviction of things not seen (that God is the one coming after us!), i.e., *faith*. And, it seems like the community of the Kingdom enters the joy of the finder when we all are living as ones who are wholly home and longing for it (needing/desiring to be found, which assumes even the 99 and 9 were at one point the one too (or should feel similarly). If this revelation of life with God is true and not so far off, **what do you and I need to arrive there too?**

REFLECTION | Responding to the Light of Jesus

Life with God is a return to whose and who we are. A turning that is first and foremost being found.

Whether we are currently wandering from our community, our purpose is buried under the dirt of daily life, or we have already been brought home and restored to our full value, how are the words of Jesus leading me to respond?

[3 minutes of Quiet]

SONG #3 – Here's My Heart by Crowder/Daigle

COMMUNION |

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

Jesus gave his body to be broken so that ours might be made whole. Gave his life for us so that ours might be lived in Him and He might live in us. Lost, we are found. And found, we are finding true life is pretty close.

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Christ's body and blood: for us, they were given.

This bread and this cup tell us we're forgiven.

Lost and found, finding life in His Life in us.

Amen

SONG #4 – Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing by Traditional

BENEDICTION | Psalm 84:1-7

As we rest in the day made for us, we prepare to enter into the work for which we are made [**LIGHT THE CANDLE**], remembering:

What a beautiful home, God-of-the-Angel-Armies! We've always longed to live in a place like this, Always dreamed of a room in your house, where we could sing for joy to God-alive! How blessed they are to live and sing there! And **how blessed all those in whom you live, whose lives become roads you travel**; We wind through lonesome valleys, come upon brooks, discover cool springs and pools brimming with rain! God-traveled, these roads of life together in Jesus curve up the mountain, and at the last turn—Zion! God in full view!