

Today we are going to be talking about the kingdom of heaven in the gospel of Matthew. Heaven is a fun topic, right? So a few weeks ago, my beloved grandpa passed away and while our family got together to celebrate his life, we went through a lot of keepsakes and family memorabilia. And my papa kept a binder full of my childhood crafts and papers entitled "Morgan's beautiful creations." I'm sure this was a product of my being a high maintenance grandchild who asked, "where is that craft I gave you last week?" just to confirm that it wasn't in the trash. Anyways, in this binder was a story I wrote in response to the prompt: What is heaven like? My heaven had streets of gold, of course. The city was white because of all the pearl. And my bedroom (yes, I have a bedroom in heaven apparently) was made completely of ruby. However, the ruby is soft and comfortable for napping on. I'm honestly shocked that I didn't mention the presence of any sort of food. So, was I right? What does the gospel of Matthew say it's like? The "kingdom of heaven" is a phrase found in the book of Matthew a whopping 32 times! Matthews continued use of the phrase "kingdom of heaven" is not only unique amongst the gospels, but the New Testament as a whole. So, we are going to look at three questions today:

- 1) Why "kingdom of heaven?" Why does Matthew think it's so important that we understand this phrase?
- 2) What is the "kingdom of heaven?" Will my bedroom be made of a soft, yet real Ruby?
- 3) How is the "kingdom of heaven" relevant to us right now in this crazy season we have found ourselves in?

1. So why "kingdom of heaven?" For Matthew, the kingdom of heaven is the central message of Jesus' teaching and that is saying a lot because Jesus taught about some pretty important things. However, the word "Βασιλεια" is used 55 times throughout the gospel of Matthew whether it be kingdom of heaven, kingdom of god, the Fathers kingdom, or simply kingdom. Matthew is clearly placing a ton of emphasis on kingdom and I want you to pay close attention to *when* Matthew likes to mention the kingdom. In Matthew chapter 3, we are introduced to John the Baptist and the first documented words out of his mouth is "the kingdom of heaven has drawn near" (v. 2). John the Baptist is a pretty important Biblical character and he is the inspiration behind one of my most favorite gifts I've given and that was a Christmas ornament with a painting of John the Baptist saying, "You brood of vipers!" If you are unfamiliar with that reference, I encourage you to go back and read Matthew 12. The man is not messing around.

One chapter after our introduction to John the Baptist, in Matthew chapter 4, we are introduced to the preaching of Jesus for the first time. And ya know what concludes his first sermon? "The kingdom of heaven has drawn near" (v. 17).

Then again in Matthew chapter 10, Jesus sends out the disciples. And what does he tell them to say? "...preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is near'" (v. 7).

The introduction of John the Baptist, the introduction of Jesus' preaching, and the commissioning of the disciples are major, pivotal moments in the gospels, and the kingdom of heaven is the central message in every single one.

The Beatitudes are framed with reference to the kingdom of heaven (5:3, 10). Jesus exhorts people to enter the kingdom of heaven multiple times (5:19-20, 7:21, 18:3, 21:31, 23:13). The Lord's prayer includes a request for God's kingdom to come to earth. And Jesus gives a series of parables for the sole purpose of explaining what the kingdom is like.

So, I'm sure you're getting the point here. Matthew weaves "the kingdom" into momentous introductions and stories over and over again to keep the central message of Jesus clear: the kingdom of heaven is coming.

So why does Matthew uniquely choose to repeat the phrase "kingdom of heaven" rather than kingdom of God like other gospel authors? The answer to this is about intentionality, not indirectness. Matthew isn't avoiding directly saying the name of God as some did out of reverence but is intentionally setting up a "heaven and earth" contrast. Matthew connects and contrasts heaven and earth over twenty times. When referring to heaven on earth, he uses the singular Ουρανός and when referring to heaven in the divine realm, he uses the plural οὐρανοῖς. He does this purposefully to convey that the divine and earthly realms are very different from each other. "Matthew is urging upon us the sense that there is a great disjunction between heaven and earth, between God's way of doing things and ours. There is a standing tension between the realms of heaven and earth, and this represents the tension between God and humanity."¹ Understanding the kingdom of heaven is essential to understanding God's incarnation.

Kingdom of heaven = God's incarnation

2. So what is the kingdom of heaven? The kingdom of heaven is the inbreaking of the kingdom of God on earth through the person of Jesus Christ. The incarnation is difficult to fathom. It is unexpected, shocking, and topsy-turvy to human sensibilities. The nature of the kingdom is unexpected and radical, and this is, perhaps, why Jesus spends so much time trying to explain it to us. The Beatitudes give us an image of the blessed ones that is just the opposite of what we would naturally value- they are the poor in spirit, the persecuted, the mourning, the meek. The parables of the kingdom paint for us pictures where debtors are freely forgiven, where the smallest seed produces the largest tree, and **where the last-come workers receive the same reward**. Jesus' model of life shows open-armed compassion for the downtrodden, the touching of the leper, the exalting of the lowly child, the welcoming of the gentile, and the listening ear for blind outcast beggars. As king of the universe he enters Jerusalem not on a warhorse or golden chariot but riding humbly on the foal of a donkey. As king of all, he willingly rides into the city where iron nails will soon be used to hang him naked on a cross in the scorching sun. As

¹ Jonathan T. Pennington. *The Kingdom of Heaven in the Gospel of Matthew*. 47.

this king instructs us, we learn that the one who wants to be first should not exercise an overbearing leadership style, but should be the slave of all. The one who is blessed by God with material wealth should set it aside to follow Christ. The one who desires to save his life must in fact die. Such is the radical nature of the vision of the kingdom that Jesus gives. This kingdom (οὐρανός), plural, is fundamentally different from the kingdoms of this world and all human expectations. The kingdom of God is not built on human wisdom or human principles, but on God's character and nature. The kingdom of heaven is fundamentally disruptive. It is the declaration that a new day has dawned because of the reality of the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

During the antiquity, many Jews expected their deliverance to come through a strong military leader. When it comes to how humans tend to function, it makes sense to desire deliverance from bondage through a violent, military defeat. It's worked before, right? The kingdom of heaven doesn't seem to care about what has worked before though. Jesus did not fulfill these expectations at all. He not only repudiates the use of violence (5:5, 9, 39, 26:52), but he heals and welcomes the Roman oppressors. How deeply irritating! Growing up, me and my best friend Cassidy had a hit list. This list comprised all the people each of us did not get along with. It didn't matter if "Tyler" had done nothing wrong to me, if he hurt Cassidy then I was going to make his life as difficult as possible. To me and Cassidy, this was love. THIS, was ultimate friendship. This sort of functioning is honestly more of a partisanship than a friendship, though. Jesus says I see your partisanship and raise you, consolidation. Jesus said to the Jews I see your desire for restitution and raise you, humility, meekness, cheek-turning, and waiting. What an unexpected response.

I am nose deep in this World War II documentary on Netflix right now. They are streaming a colorized version of an old, well done documentary. And while that war was filled with pivotal moments, one story that stands out to me is that of Nobuo Fujita. He was a Japanese fighter pilot with the distinction of being the only pilot to have flown an enemy aircraft that bombed the mainland of the United States. In 1942, he bombed the west coast of the United States over Oregon. This bombing caused collateral damage that sparked fires in Oregon's dense and vast forests. One town that was greatly affected by Fujita's raids was Brookings, Oregon. So, in 1962, Fujita returned to the United States for the first time since his raids and visited the town of Brookings. He brought with him a 400-year-old Samurai sword as a final symbol of his surrender and good will, which the town accepted. The town displays this symbol to this day as a sign of the friendship between the town and the man who tried to destroy it. That is powerful. We can stand tall and boldly declare "this is what is right!" or we can be like Brookings, Oregon who stood tall and declared "this is what is righteous." Righteousness is God-led. Rightness is human-led. There is a way that is divine and there is a way that is mine and they are not the same.

3. So how is this "kingdom of heaven" relevant to us right now?

It's relevant because the kingdom of heaven is an invitation to have a heaven-oriented identity. The kingdom of heaven is challenging, urgent, counter-intuitive, counter-cultural, and always hopeful. The kingdom of heaven asks you what your situation is like and then asks you to think

again. The kingdom of heaven turns mourning into dancing and sees beauty where there are ashes. The kingdom of heaven turns shame into glory and graves into gardens. The kingdom of heaven turns seas into highways and dead bones into armies. The kingdom asks, "what if this crazy season we are in -this seeming valley- is in some way a mountain? What if this forced pause in the patterns of our everyday lives has put us in the perfect position to view the larger, holy story that is and always has been unfolding right before us? It is actually a bit timely that this pandemic is happening during Lent because in the words of my pastor friend, Justin, "a big part of Lent is to not rush to the good thing... not rushing to the resurrection. The resurrection is important, and we'll get there, but stay a little longer and dwell with the Passion." The kingdom of heaven is the glorious resurrection of Jesus, yes, and it is also the disheartening death of our savior. The kingdom of heaven is death for life. Jesus has given us a new, holy reality and every day we are invited to hope in it.

Last week on the 19th, we had our first official day of spring and I invite you to close your eyes and listen to these words about it: The audacity for spring to have sprung today! Cries human suffering. But perhaps it is holding what our grief cannot: a resurrection about to bloom.

Friends, the God of the mountains is the God of the valleys. Just like Jesus broke into this world to rescue it from darkness, Jesus desires to break into your heart to rescue it from fear. Maybe you fear for your health. Maybe you fear for your investments. Maybe you fear the spread of false information. Whatever it is that you fear, you are being asked to surrender it to Love. For God so loved the world, that he broke into it to shine a light in the darkest of places. There is no season too dark and no situation too hopeless. Perhaps the fact that so much of the global community is willing to temporarily pause the everyday patterns and privileges of their own lives to protect the vulnerable among us is, in fact, the kingdom of heaven at hand.

Amen.