

"A Strange Sort of Kingdom"

Second in a Series on the Christmas Gospel

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)

Mark 1:9-15 (also Luke 1:26-38)

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Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him. . . . While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness." . . . Later, after John the Baptizer was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee. He was announcing God's good news. "Now is the time! Here comes God's kingdom!"¹

Worth Waiting For?

There it is, the heart of what Jesus is all about. God's kingdom. Jesus brings it! It's what we're waiting for . . . maybe.

I'm waiting for Covid to end. For violence to cease. For us to get our act together about climate change. For Indigenous people to finally receive justice. Things like that. Christmas too.

But surrounding Christmas, we find all sorts of kingdom talk.

You heard the angel's promise to Mary about her child.

*The Lord God will give him the throne [a kingdom word]
of his father David [his distant ancestor, actually, Israel's greatest king],
and he will reign [another kingdom word]
over Israel's descendants forever.
His kingdom will never end.*

Just two sentences, stuffed full of the kingdom.

What do we make of it? Is this "kingdom" worth waiting for? Can it be good news for us today?

Fit for the Queen

We're not used to kingdoms. Disney's Magic Kingdom is make-believe. The United Kingdom's queen doesn't have real power. Absolute monarchies like Saudi Arabia don't appeal to us. Most folks through history, though, have known exactly what kingdoms were about.

Let's use an example, a kingdom with a queen, Elizabeth I.

¹ Adapted from the Common English Bible.

A kingdom has a sovereign. Elizabeth's grandfather gained power by winning the War of the Roses. She inherited power when her dad King Henry VIII, who had beheaded her mother, died, and then her little brother King Edward VI died, then her cousin Queen Jane was executed, then her older sister Queen Mary died. Elizabeth became sovereign by not dying!

A kingdom is a territory. Elizabeth ruled England, Wales, and Ireland.

A kingdom is a people, loyal to the sovereign. But Elizabeth's subjects were deeply divided by religion and nationality. Many, especially in Ireland, were not loyal to her. Still, she reigned for 44 years.

A sovereign is exclusive. There can only be one. If two claim power, it's a problem. Some wanted Elizabeth's cousin Mary of Scotland to be queen instead. So eventually, Mary lost her head!

A sovereign protects the kingdom. That's job #1. Elizabeth's England faced invasion by Spain. Heroism, a bit of luck, and a good storm saved them from the Armada.

Elizabeth's capital was London, but she moved around. She'd see what was going on, and show her majesty. It was cheaper too! She would visit her nobles, bringing her whole entourage, and make them foot the bill!

When the queen was coming, everything was readied for her. Her favourite foods in the pantry. Her personal playlist downloaded for the lute-player. Her favourite pass-times arranged. Everything was oriented to what the queen wanted. Wherever the queen went, there was her kingdom in miniature. Everything was done her way, fit for the queen.²

These days, is this what we're waiting for? A kingdom like Elizabeth's?

Thy Kingdom Come

What about Mary in Nazareth? What were she and her people waiting for?

God's Kingdom.

For generations they had endured oppression and humiliation under foreign emperors and tyrants. Even when one of their own had ruled, things were not right.

But sometime soon, they hoped, the new king would arise. Israel's prophets had promised. The Messiah! He would come from the royal family of the great King David.

² John P. Bowen, [The Unfolding Gospel: How the Good News makes sense of Discipleship, Church, Mission, and Everything Else](#) (Minneapolis MN: Fortress, 2021), 19.

God would establish his sovereignty.

The Messiah would rule a territory. He would unite Judah, Samaria, and Galilee, and regain all the lands God had promised.

The Messiah would restore the people. The descendants of Israel, the twelve tribes, he would bring them back together. All who were faithful to God's covenants would belong.

Only the Messiah would rule. No pretenders or rivals could challenge him.

The Messiah would protect them. He would rescue them from their enemies, the powers that inflict violence, oppression, and humiliation.

The Messiah would make a kingdom fit for the true King, God! It would be God's Kingdom. Everything would be done God's way. Peace. Justice. Mercy. Wholeness. Flourishing. Faithfulness. Goodness. This is what it is like when God rules.

Can you see why people were waiting for this? Would you?

Jesus comes along, announcing this gospel good news, "*Here comes God's kingdom!*" People start wondering. Can it finally be here? Can this Jesus be the Messiah? The angel said so. John the Baptizer thought so.

Is this what we've been waiting for?

A Strange Sort of Kingdom

But what Jesus ends up bringing, and doing, and being, is so strangely different from what they, or anyone, was expecting?

He descends from King David. God's Spirit rests on him. He has God's approval! "*You are my Son, my Beloved. With you I am well pleased.*" But his beginnings are so small. Instead of nobles, his birth is attended by animals. He grows up in Nazareth, which is nothing. His family are nobodies. Strange credentials for the Messiah to carry.

The Messiah-King will battle to protect the people. But Jesus does reject violence. Instead of striking blows, he turns his cheek. He does not crush his human enemies; he loves and forgives them. Strange ways for the Messiah to fight.

The Messiah-King will rule. Jesus is born under King Herod's rule, who then unleashes terror, forcing Jesus' family to flee. Years later, Jesus stands before Herod's son, but in chains. Jesus ends up executed by the authority of the Roman emperor who rules over them all. Atop Jesus' cross they wrote, "*King of the Jews!*" It's a joke. He dies, shamed and defeated. Then he rises from the dead! But he shows himself to hardly

anyone, just his few followers. Strange way for the Messiah to win.

Remember also, a sovereign rules over a territory and commands the loyalty of citizens. We'll see how Jesus does these over the next couple weeks. Sneak peek . . . He does them strangely!

Remember everywhere Elizabeth went, things were done her way. What's Jesus' way? Where he goes . . . I like how my teacher John Bowen puts it.

*[Jesus] heals the sick, raises the dead, feeds the hungry, and welcomes the marginalized. He forgives sins, shows his power over the forces of nature, and confronts the power of oppression. As we watch Jesus at work, we see a small-scale model of what the world looks like when the Creator's love is expressed in everything, overcoming evil and creating wholeness.*³

Hmm. Is this starting to feel like what we're waiting for?

The Gospel of King Jesus

This Advent season, we're seeing the heart of what Jesus is about, the Christmas Gospel. *Jesus brings God's Kingdom!*

We have our ideas about how the world *should* work, and what God *should* do to make things right. But our ideas are not God's!

Jesus the Messiah shows us something so different, his strange Kingdom. And God is very pleased with him.

Remember what I said I'm waiting for, and maybe you are too? Covid cured. Violence banished. Us finally living rightly within God's creation, and all our relations, including Indigenous peoples and newcomers. Oh, and Christmas too. Of course, add to the list what you're waiting for.

Dallas Willard once said, "*Jesus is the human face on the kingdom of God.*"⁴ A bit like Elizabeth travelling around, wherever Jesus is, wherever he goes, there is the kingdom. God's Kingdom is not an idea, a manifesto, a program. It's this person, Jesus. Wherever he is, *Jesus brings God's Kingdom!*

What does this mean for all these things we're waiting for? What do you think?

Might this strange sort of kingdom, this Jesus-shaped Kingdom, be exactly what we, the whole world, all of creation, need?

Well, Jesus has come. He is here! It's Advent. So we wait.

³ Bowen, 18f.

⁴ Quoted in Bowen, 20.