

Luke 3:21-22  
What Then Shall We Do?  
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Well it's good to be back with you this morning, we are grateful for a little time away in Minnesota with my family, where the temperatures didn't get above minus 10—but hey, we didn't have any snow either which made it doubly unbearable. But a few trips to the indoor amusement park, lots of visits to the local coffee shop, and season 2 of *The Crown* kept us pretty busy during our time away. And because Christmas Eve landed on a Sunday, this was also the first time in 11 years that we have been able to spend Christmas morning in my parents' family room—making them very happy I know. I'm also grateful to Mark for preaching last week, thank you dear friend.

Why are we here? For what purpose are we here? I thought I would open the new year with a light ice breaker question.

We tend to get reflective after periods of intense busyness, like the holidays. Where we scurry around so busily, and then Christmas morning hits, and it's all over as quickly as we can finish the holiday dinner. Have you ever used this phrase: I'm just trying to survive the holidays? Or maybe your reflectiveness is because you're transitioning from one season of life to another (kids to empty nest, careered to retired, retired and you or someone you know is nearing a different kind of retirement), or perhaps you are in a place where you feel like you don't know what the next move is or you're not sure when...if ever, the next chapter will begin.

Like Mary, Jesus' mother, when big things happen we ponder them in our hearts.

And in these moments we ask big questions: For what purpose are we here together? These are questions we not only ponder individually, but it is the question we as leadership of the church are working through at this time. And we ask the tough question is because, well, because our lives depend upon it, and the life of this church depends upon it as well.

Human nature needs a vision set before it, a vision of life that is truly worth living, that is worth investing in, a life that is even worth dying for. Do you have that kind of vision, that kind of purpose guiding your life? The kind that propels you out of bed each morning because there is holy work to be done. Or are you like me most days—woah woah woah, let me get my coffee first freakshow.

As a society, I think we struggle for this kind of vision. We may have been turned down, shut out, or passed up, now we've grown content to just get by. We've replaced the dreams God placed in our hearts and settled for the good enough dream of a comfortable life.

Well I want to say to you this morning—if you're resonating with what I've just described—God hasn't given up on his dreams for the world (last I checked, we're still in Christmas, and we're still singing the the Carols that announced one fulfillment of God's dream in the incarnation of Jesus). God hasn't given up his dream for the world and for your life, and neither should you. It's just that maybe we haven't been given the right lens to view it, or the right perspective to understand it.

The Scriptures give that dream a name, Jesus calls it The Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God, a present reality of God's kingly reign on earth as it is in heaven.

So for the next three hundred and some odd days our minds and our attention as a church, as leadership, as citizens of the great cities of Wabash, Marion, (any others?) will be focused on what I believe to be the single most compelling vision for life and purpose any of us will ever know. Because when Jesus entered our world as a baby, God took on flesh, living among us, revealing to us what true life, what true riches, what true abundance was.

For our journey together, very simply, we will walk together with Jesus in the Gospel of Luke as he reveals this tangible kingdom.

Today is really more of an introduction to what I believe will be a meaningful time together learning from and being shaped by Jesus for life as citizens of his Kingdom.

But before we begin I'd like to pray for our time together this year. Would you pray with me? Father we are grateful to have received this amazing and breathtaking gift of your Word. But Lord we know that unless we allow its wisdom and intentions to sink down deep into our lives, then it is just words on a piece of paper. I ask today that you would soften our hearts, sharpen our minds, open our eyes and tune our ears to hear what it is you have to say to us and what you have to show us through your son Jesus, who is our savior and Lord, in whose name I pray, amen.

As I begin, I want to spend a little time talking about this word Kingdom. Certainly it is not a foreign word, you no doubt know what Kingdoms are—if you are watching The Crown, as we have you get a really compelling look into the British Monarchy (Kingdom).

But what is a Kingdom?

Very simply, a Kingdom is a realm that exists under the rule of a King. Now as you are probably aware Kings and Kingdoms come in many shapes and forms. Historically, kings can be very good and they can be very evil, and pretty much everything in between—this is also true of the Biblical examples. Kingdoms can be characterized by a political rule, or by military might. Kingdoms can amass great sums of wealth; great rulers can grow in power and create great names for themselves, all at the expense of their people. Historically, this is generally how Kingdoms work.

But when the Bible addresses this idea of THE Kingdom, or the Kingdom of God, it has in mind a unique and very specific vision.

Now the Kingdom doesn't really show up, per se, in the Old Testament, but what does get discussed at great length is the idea of God's reign on earth. This is the dream that the prophets saw in great visions and then revealed to the people. Prophets like Isaiah, who say things like: **“On that day he will judge by what his eyes see, with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. Righteousness shall be his belt of his waist. The wolf will lie down with the lamb, the leopard with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child will lead them.” Or “On that day he will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces.”**

In the Old Testament, the Kingdom or reign was a promise to God's people that life wouldn't always be hard, their lives wouldn't always be characterized by suffering and persecution. This is why so much of the Abolitionist and Civil Rights Movement drew its inspiration from the Old Testament. One day there would come a King who would set things to right, and until that day they would sing, testify, remind one another of those prophetic visions.

When I was in college I had a senior history seminar, and this particular semester the only 300 level seminar that was available to me was The History of African American Women in Antebellum America—I would love to say that I was fired up about that particular topic, I wasn't. However, midway through the semester as we were beginning to close in on our thesis topics, the idea of slave spirituals came to me. And what I learned from listening to hours upon hours of Slave Spiritual music was that the yearning they expressed, yearning for liberation from Pharaoh and all sorts of bondage was the yearning for thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

Then fast forward to the New Testament and the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, as Mark recounts it, the very first words Jesus spoke: The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is in your midst; repent and believe the Good News (Gospel). In Luke 4, what we will address in a few weeks, Jesus says that the Good News of the Kingdom is: Good News to poor folks (and there are many ways of being poor); freedom to people who find themselves captive to something or someone outside themselves; sight to blind eyes; freedom to the oppressed; and God's favor to rest on his people.

Very simply the Kingdom of God is the good news of what it looks like when God's reign and rule take root in our lives and in our world. This is a vision that in large measure has become lost in many of our churches as we have worked harder to maintain institutions and bureaucracies, or advance our religious and cultural agenda, instead of letting this dream of God's take root in our lives.

The Kingdom of God appears when neighbors gather together at the kitchen table over coffee to understand each other's lives and experiences; the Kingdom of God takes place when people choose to walk alongside one another through hurt and hardship, rather than offering them a little bible truism and a half hearted "I'll pray for you."

The Kingdom of God happens when churches, like some of those we visited in Cuba saw needs of people all around them like basic clean clothes, or fellowship for elderly, or meals to those who were not mobile and could not afford groceries. When Churches like ours are attuned to the needs of their communities and decide to do something about it.

When the God's grace and the forgiveness of the Cross is so compelling in our lives that it moves us to extend forgiveness and reconciliation to those who have injured us, thereby building bridges and community, that is when the Kingdom of God comes.

When people have enough, see enough, and know they are enough to be welcome in God's house, because of the fact that we are all blind beggars, we are all sinners from birth, undeserving by rights—yet because of his extravagant love God invites us in to join him at his table. This is when the Kingdom of God breaks in. This is a vision that so many in our world are longing for, and a vision the Church so desperately needs to recapture.

In fact I believe we are at an intersection in our nation right now, as we speak.

I recently read two articles that really startled me. The first was from the Huffington Post called: “Why Millennials are Facing the Scariest Financial Future of any Since the Great Depression.” If you will allow me I’d like to read a quote:

We’ve all heard the statistics. More millennials live with their parents than with roommates. We are delaying partner-marrying and house-buying and kid-having for longer than any previous generation. And, according to The Olds, our problems are all our fault: We got the wrong degree. We spend money we don’t have on things we don’t need. We still haven’t learned to code. We killed cereal and department stores and golf and napkins and lunch. Mention “millennial” to anyone over 40 and the word “entitlement” will come back at you within seconds, our own intergenerational game of Marco Polo.

This is what it feels like to be young now. Not only are we screwed, but we have to listen to lectures about our laziness and our participation trophies from the people who screwed us.

We’ve taken on 300% more debt than our parents, half as likely to own a home, 1 in 5 is living in poverty, based on trends many won’t be able to retire until we’re 75.

What is different about the world around us is profound. Salaries have stagnated and entire sectors have cratered. At the same time, the cost of every prerequisite of a secure existence—education, housing and health care—has inflated into the stratosphere. Everything from job security to the social safety nets that insulate us from ruin are eroding. And the opportunities leading to a middle-class life—the ones the boomers lucked into—are being lifted out of our reach.

This is why the touchstone experience of millennials, the thing that truly defines us, is not helicopter parenting or unpaid internships or Pokémon Go. It is uncertainty.

The second article presented a series of statistics. According to the Barna Group less than 3 in 10 twentysomethings attend church regularly, 4 in 10 of those in their 30s, and half of those over 40. And I suspect these figures to actually be lower because they are a little dated.

As I said our culture is literally dying for a vision that will lift its hopes for a life that has meaning purpose and fulfillment. And the Church is literally dying because it has lost its vision, and is merely talking past an entire generation who sees it as archaic, outdated, unaware, unnecessary, and irrelevant.

Does this sound like the kind of world that Jesus had in mind when he said in John 10:10: **I have come that they might have life and life abundantly?**

It’s not that people aren’t willing to give themselves to something, it’s that we haven’t done a good job of presenting them with that vision worth dying for. Jesus’ vision. That’s why we are going to spend this year becoming or recommitting ourselves to being apprentices of Jesus. And why we are going to focus our attention on his dream, the Kingdom of God.

Now if we were going to imagine the Kingdom of God through our eyes, we might be tempted to imagine it as expansive as the Grand Canyon, dwarfing everything in sight. Or the Kingdom of God is like the most enduring the Political Dynasty the world has ever seen, only bigger and better, or the kingdom of God is like the greatest army like Medieval Christian Army that was conquering everything in sight in the name of God. Or the Kingdom of God is like the biggest Megachurch with the biggest budget, the most awe-inspiring worship or programs, the most learned pastors who are as hip and Justin Bieber and as wise as Solomon.

The kingdom of God, Jesus will go on to say is like a tiny seed, that a farmer plants in the soil, this insignificant inanimate object is just put in the dirt and then miraculously the dirt brings forth life. The man puts it in the ground, that's it! All by itself. Now the farmer waits patiently, the farmer waters occasionally, but the miracle is that God is capable of cultivating great life through very small, seemingly insignificant things.

God does not overlook that which is small and overlooked by the world. If anything God has a very special love for the overlooked. So should we. You cannot imagine the potential of your words or actions in the life of one person, the ripple effect can be exponential.

A friend of mine is a part of a Church in Chicago, and a few years back the church was on a pretty precipitous decline, they were in danger if they didn't do something the church would probably have to close. Next door was a gym that was also going to close because membership was dropping as well. The church said, well buy you out. Now they run a free work out space for people in their neighborhood. Men and women of all ages come in to exercise and elders and members of the Church are there to supervise and offer hospitality.

One day one of the guys, who was a former gang member said to my friend, why are you being so nice to us?

And his answer to that guy is our scripture passage for today and my charge to each of us. It is not a grand vision of heaven come down, but in a way it is the grandest news for anyone of us of heaven come down. It comes from Luke 3:21-22. It says that when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in body form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, you are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.

Arguably the first word that God speaks over us about the Kingdom is not what you have to do, but it's who you are. And when you know who you are, when you have the confidence to know that you are known and loved, and that you have a father who doesn't just put up with you, but is well pleased, that doesn't lead to complacency, it leads to boldness, to action, to grateful living so that others would know that same feeling of being known and loved and given holy purpose.

Holy purpose, that's what the Spirit is calling us to dig deeper into this year. But in order to be ready for the journey, we'd better get our energy, we'd better receive the holy nourishment of the Kingdom of God. So I invite you to join me at the table for the joyful feast of the Kingdom of God.