

# Alan Baughcum

Sermon: The Good News of the Kingdom  
Reverend Dr. Alan Baughcum  
St. Michael's UCC, Baltimore Ohio  
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Isaiah 9:1-4, Matthew 4:12-23

The experiences we've had in our lives certainly affect our understanding of the words we read in Scripture, don't they? I think that many people must brace themselves when they read or hear the words of Jesus, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Many of us have heard preachers in their sermons tie in their call for us to repent with graphic denunciations of all that we might have done wrong to demonstrate our need to repent. Then those same preachers follow up with threats of hellfire and brimstone if we don't repent. So, a first reading of Jesus' words this morning might evoke for many of us very uncomfortable feelings associated with wrongdoing and with fears of punishment.

Based on our culture and our experience Jesus' words "the kingdom of heaven has come near" may also suggest punishment. The use of the words "kingdom of heaven" was and is a way that Jews can reverently refer to You-Know-Who without saying the name that is too holy to say directly.

For many of us our image of You-Know-Who, God, was that of a very big and very old man with a great white beard sitting in the sky who kept careful tally of all we did, judging us every minute as to whether we were doing right or wrong. So, for me, growing up as I did among the dinosaurs in those sexist and patriarchal times so many eons past, hearing the words "the kingdom of heaven has come near" is as if my mother had said, "Just you wait until I tell your father what you did when he gets home from work!" My mother's warning told me that punishment was coming, and I lived in dread until the punishment actually arrived.

We get a better sense, a truer sense, of what Jesus was preaching from the words of Isaiah, quoted by Matthew. Isaiah is describing the gloom of the anguished people of Galilee, conquered by the Assyrians and then colonized with non-Jews, sort of like what China has done by importing Chinese to live in Tibet. The Assyrians not only mixed up the peoples they conquered, but they also set their conquered lands under the rule of strange and alien peoples — in the case of Galilee, Gentiles no less!

However, Isaiah announces that the gloom of the people of Galilee will disappear. What wonderful words! "The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined." Scholars believe that these were words used in ancient times in rituals for announcing the birth of a child who was in line to become king. Christians have appropriated those same words to describe Jesus, the one who rules our hearts and lives, the head of our church. The birth of Jesus brings joy and ends all that oppresses the people who believe in him, who accept him as savior and redeemer, who follow his will for their lives.

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When Jesus preaches repentance, he is preaching the good news of light in the darkness. The word for “repent” in Hebrew means “turn” or “turn back.” Turn away from our present course in the darkness and turn back towards God who has sent the light, Jesus, to guide our way. In Jesus “the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Jesus has brought near to us the divine rule of God in our lives. Jesus has brought light into our darkness.

The people of Jesus’ time must have seen the good news, God’s light, in Jesus. Why else would those fishermen have dropped what they were doing and instantly become followers of Jesus? The people who saw that Jesus was able to cure every disease and heal every sickness must have recognized that here was someone unusual indeed. Jesus brought hope that their present reality of suffering and oppression and poverty was not the last word. God has the last word, and in Jesus God had raised up someone to proclaim God’s good news for all of creation.

Two thousand years later how do we have that same hope? How do we know that our present reality of division in the public square and war and the fear of war are not the last word? The answer is the same — Jesus. We know that our present troubles are not the last word because God raised Jesus from the dead to eternal life at God’s right hand. Never happened before. Hasn’t happened since. God raised a human being from the end to which we all come — death — into life everlasting — the only time that’s ever happened. We know that from the scriptures which tell us of Jesus’ resurrection. We know that from the Holy Spirit which can, as we read the scriptures, fill us with the light and the reality of the living God, Jesus seated at the right hand of the Father, interceding for us with prayer and supplication. We also know that the present reality is not the last word when we minister together in Jesus’ name — we experience the transforming and joyful presence of our risen Savior among us.

Humanity has come a long way in the last two hundred years. The engines of the global economy have raised billions of people out of poverty. But the distribution of the benefits of global growth and prosperity have been unevenly distributed. Hundreds of millions remain in dire straits. And, in many places, the environmental costs of growth have been high indeed. Also, we still have not solved the problems of human tyranny and our propensity for war with one another.

Many people struggle with how to believe in a just and loving God given all the suffering and misery and injustice and war in the world. Christians believe that God knows our suffering and suffers with us. Emmanuel, God-with-us, wept over the death of a loved one two thousand years ago. Jesus said he would be with us always and, even now, weeps with us and supports us in our grieving and in our struggles.

Just as with the people of Isaiah’s time and, also of the time when Jesus walked the earth, God promises us in our time that the present reality is not the final word. It is God’s plan and intention to transform the world into the creation God intended at the beginning.

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How can we know that? What gives us hope of transformation? God's resurrection of Jesus. The light has not died. The light lives and shines! God's unique act in the resurrection of Jesus is proof of God's intentions. Jesus lives, and God intends that we who follow and who do as God commands — we will live as well. In Jesus the kingdom of heaven has come near. In Jesus there is no violence or war, only healing and life. Jesus shows us what the kingdom of heaven looks like.

The resurrection of Jesus to eternal life is proof of God's intentions to transform all of creation. Jesus is the first fruits of that transformation. And that transformation gives us hope! The resurrection of Jesus tells us that there will come a time when God will transform this earth into a place where we shall all live in peace and plenty and in right relationship with God and with one another. Just as Jesus did ... so also will we.

Shall we simply sit back and wait for that coming transformation? No! The Old Testament prophet Micah tells us that we are to do justice. God calls for us to suffer with and to work on behalf of the poor and the outcast. Jesus fed the hungry and healed the sick. Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount to tell us that we were to work to free the oppressed, to clothe the naked, and to become peacemakers. God does not expect us to be passive. We are called to be active participants in God's purposes.

We are called to help the world end poverty and war and oppression. We are called to educate the peoples of this planet. We are called to find cures for illness and disease.

This country faces seemingly intractable problems of division and domestic and international terrorism and the threat of war. But there is hope! God has called us to work for peace, even peace with those who hate us and want to kill us. I believe that God is at work among us and even among our enemies who hate us. God promises to be with us, and to bring all of us at the end into God's peaceable kingdom.

Churches face that same struggle. So many Christian churches have disappeared, and more are forecast to go out of existence. We do not want that to happen here. What this church has stood for and has accomplished in the local community needs to continue — our care and love for one another, our missions to the larger world, our welcome of guests, and our sustaining worship services of word and music. We want to continue to proclaim in our worship, in our ministries, and in our missions the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near, and that God is working his purposes out.

Can we really believe that? Can we have hope that this joyful community of God can survive, even grow, and deepen its faith and extend the reach of its faith? Yes! Yes! Yes! Do not be afraid! God is our life and our salvation. Of whom shall we be afraid?

With the help of the God who covenanted with the Hebrew slaves more than three thousand years ago — "I will be your God, and you will be my people." With the help of the living God

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who took on flesh to live among us and who heads our church, yes, we can witness for God, we can survive, and we can minister!

The poet Rilke wrote:

God speaks to each of us as He makes us,  
then walks with us silently out of the night.

These are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent out beyond your recall,  
go to the limits of your longing.  
Embody me.

Flare up like flame  
and make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.  
Just keep going. No feeling is final.  
Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.  
You will know it by its seriousness.

Give me your hand.

Amen!