



“For the Least”

Isaiah 7:10-16, 40:1-5

Jesus came for all, but especially for the least among us.

A dark room seems that much darker when we’ve stepped into it from the bright outdoors. Moviemakers will use one spot of color in a black-and-white image to heighten dramatically the contrast. Christmas is a time of much joy and happiness for many of us, but that very joy can serve to deepen the loneliness of those who are alone and the suffering of those who hurt. The pain of divorce, job loss, death, and illness can all be made worse by the Christmas season.

There are two enduring characters in Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*: Scrooge and Tiny Tim. Last week, we observed that in Scrooge we could see the Christian story of transformation, of repentance and rebirth. This is a story that most of us understand. We might not fully appreciate it or make it our own, but we get it. However, Tiny Tim’s story is one about the arrival of God’s kingdom and this story is one that few of us really “get.” “Yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Matthew 11:11)¹ “Advent” comes from the Latin for “arrival.” In Advent, we await the arrival of the baby Jesus. But on a deeper level, we await the arrival of God’s Messiah and the world’s Savior. And on a yet even deeper level, we await the arrival of God and God’s kingdom.² Of course, at Christmas,

we actually celebrate Jesus’ coming 2,000 years ago while we await his second coming. In the same way, we celebrate the arrival of God’s kingdom nearly 2,000 years ago while we await Jesus’ return and the full consummation of the kingdom.

In *A Christmas Carol*, Tiny Tim is one of the “least.” He is poor, crippled, and will likely die before long. He is trapped in the mire of pain and suffering that plagues so much of our world. Nonetheless, he is anxious to go to church on Christmas so that others will be reminded who it is that made the lame walk. He is filled with joy and is “as good as gold and better” in his father’s eyes and even Scrooge’s. Tiny Tim represents the most tragic and the most hopeful aspects of this world. It is as if Paul is thinking about Tiny Tim when he reminds Christians that we are the ones “upon whom the ends of the ages have met” (1 Corinthians 10:11). Indeed, through Scrooge’s repentance and rebirth, Tiny Tim will be healed. He will be made whole, for the “lame shall leap like a deer” in God’s kingdom (Isaiah 35:6). Jesus’ healings were more than acts of compassion; they were enactments of the reality of God’s kingdom. In the kingdom there are no blind, no deaf, no lame, no loneliness, no hurting, no pain, no death. And this kingdom is not a just a future event; it has already been ushered in by Christ, though there is still much work to be done.

“Thy Kingdom Come”

When it comes to comprehending that the kingdom of God is a present, though not yet fully manifest, reality, the Lord’s Prayer can actually work against us if we are not thoughtful. The phrase “Thy kingdom come” might lead us to think that the kingdom is only a future event. How might we come to see it as present also?

When I see volunteers pushing carts of food across the parking lot to families in need, I see the kingdom of God present. When I see a baptism, I see the kingdom present. When we gather for Holy Communion, I can see the presence of the kingdom in the faces of the congregation. These are all brief snatches of grace-filled time when all is right and good and loving. However, brief such experiences might be, it is as if we have stepped into another world, into the kingdom, into the place where the God of love and mercy rules.

There are more such moments than we think. We just often don’t recognize them for what they are. As Philip Yancey puts it, we miss the “rumors of another world.” Yancey urges us to have stereoscopic vision, able to view both the seen world and the unseen.

¹ Jesus is speaking of John the Baptist here.

² The challenge is to make this kingdom-talk concrete. Just imagine what it would be like to live in a land in which God is king. Or more concrete still – imagine that you live in a nation ruled by Jesus of Nazareth, the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount. And imagine that the heart of every person in this place has been reshaped into the heart of Jesus. That is what we mean by “the kingdom of God.”

Our hurts are expressions of a broken world; the Christ child is the hope of a renewed world. *But* it is not as if our hurts then magically disappear. We don't throw the hurts of this world into a bowl with the healing of the kingdom so that we can mix them together, expecting to erase our pains. It is more like we clutch onto the reality of God's kingdom, so that its healing and hope carry us through the dark days and past our hurts, for there is nothing that "can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

The birth of Jesus was an event of cosmic significance, turning the world upside-down. In God's kingdom, the meek shall inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5). In God's kingdom, the least, such as Tiny Tim, are greater than John the Baptist. This may sound like nothing more than nice sentiment or it might even simply strike you as outlandish – but it is true nonetheless! And the sooner we live out the reality of God's kingdom in this world, the sooner we will grasp the true meaning of Christmas. "God bless Us, Everyone!"

Final thoughts and a few questions

When I reread *A Christmas Carol* recently, I was most struck by the word images that Dickens paints on the last pages. When Scrooge is reborn after the visit of the final Ghost, he sees the world as he never saw it before. It is not like he lost his mind or disconnected from reality; it is more like he donned Yancey's stereoscopic glasses and could see the present reality of God's kingdom. That morning, Scrooge's world became a place filled with generosity and laughter. Scrooge didn't mind that people made fun of him as time went on. He could see the other world, the City of God, even if others were blind to it, and that was enough for him. Tiny Tim's healing is another enactment of God's kingdom. By the grace of God, Scrooge repented, truly, and became the instrument of Tiny Tim's salvation.

How might understanding ourselves as individuals and a community living in two worlds (the City of God and the city of this world) change us -- our lives, our priorities – even our congregation? Are we forced to divide loyalties? Gordon Fee, a leading New Testament scholar, wrote that if he were going to return to be the pastor of a local church (as he once was), he ". . . would set about with a single-minded passion to help a local body of believers recapture the New Testament church's understanding of itself as an eschatological community." What he means is a community that lives between times, in two worlds. How could such an understanding be so important? Why would he say such a thing?

Richard Hays, a UMC ordained pastor and New Testament scholar, writes, ". . . the redemptive power of God has already broken into the present time, and the form of this world is passing away." What do you think our role is to be in the consummation of God's kingdom? Should we quietly await Jesus' return and watch the present world "pass away?" Or are we to do all we can to renew creation and make God's kingdom a present reality? If renewal is our responsibility, what can we actually do? What did Scrooge do?