



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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In the Midst of You

Luke 17:20-37

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In Luke 17:20-37 we have another encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees. Luke tells us in verse 20:

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming... (NRSV)

As a pastor I read that and feel sympathy for Jesus. I'm sure this wasn't the first or only time someone asked him a question about the coming of the kingdom. I'm sure because this is the sort of question preachers are asked all the time. A few weeks ago I was talking to a group of men about the need for holiness. It was an important subject and we only scratched the surface. Afterward, one of the guys asked he could ask me something. I was thinking that this was someone who wanted to dig deeper into the pursuit of holiness. But then he asked me about "blood moons" and "the rapture". Sigh. If you want to discourage a preacher, that's the way to do it! Everyone wants to know "when" or "how" or "what to look for". A whole publishing and entertainment industry has developed over the last few decades committed to churning out TV shows, bad movies, and even worse books speculating about "Bible prophecy" and "end times". I used to wonder if our generation was the first to be obsessed with this question of when the kingdom is coming. A theological system called Dispensationalism that was developed about two hundred years ago and then popularised by the Scofield Bible during the 20th Century has done a lot to fuel the fires of all this speculation. But Dispensationalism isn't the first system of bad theology to fuel

obsession with last things and if we read the Gospels closely and in context we see that the Jews of Jesus' day were possibly even more obsessed with these sorts of things than people today. They weren't asking about raptures or tribulations, but in the First Century the people's hope and expectation of the coming of the Messiah had reached fever pitch. Just as many people today read with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other and are utterly sure that these things are just around the corner; just as there are preachers on TV and people writing books insisting that today's events are sure heralds of the end, Jews of Jesus' day saw everything pointing to the coming of the Messiah, to the vindication of Israel, and to the destruction of the gentiles and especially the Romans. They wanted release from exile, they wanted an end to their misery, they wanted the wrath of God to fall down on their enemies. And in that they don't seem very different from many Christians today obsessed with last things: we're tired of our misery, we're tired of tribulation, we want out of this broken material world or our sick and dying bodies, we want vindication for our faithfulness and we want to see the wrath of God fall on sinners and on the people who oppose us.

And so that Pharisees ask: When is the kingdom of God coming? But Jesus doesn't give the answer they expect. In fact, he doesn't give the answer many Christians today would expect. He responds to their question with a solemn warning and an exhortation to stop worrying about the future and to prepare for it by taking action *today*. The events that Jesus is talking about here in Luke 17 happened almost two thousand years ago, but the warning he gives to the Pharisees and to his disciples is a warning we need to hear too.

"When is the kingdom of God coming?" they ask. And Luke says:

[Jesus] answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you."

Brothers and sisters, this ought to put an end to the speculations of all the books and all the TV preachers who are constantly telling us "Look, here it is!" The kingdom of God is not heralded by earthly kings or armies or by astrological signs or blood moons. Anyone who tries to sell you on that kind of fortune telling is picking your pocket and directing your eyes away from the kingdom itself. The fact is that the kingdom has come. It actually does have observable signs, they're just not the signs the Jews or many modern Christians are looking for. Think back to John the Baptist sending his disciples to Jesus. There was Jesus in the middle of the crowd healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, preaching good news to the poor and John's disciples pushing through to him and interrupting him as he did these things to ask if he was really the Messiah. Just like the Pharisees, John and his friends were looking for the wrong kind of signs. As Luke tells Jesus' story, we've seen that the kingdom of God is already present with Jesus. We see it as he cleanses the unclean, heals the sick, gives sight to the blind, forgives sinners, and welcomes outsiders into the kingdom—that's been the point of everything he's been doing. And this is what it means when he says that the kingdom is in their midst. They're looking to the heavens for a sign that God has come; they're looking for the Messiah to ride in on a chariot to vanquish their enemies, and Jesus pulls them down to earth and right to the present moment and says: *It's right here!*

How often do we miss God at work because, just like the Jews, we're looking for the wrong thing? Someone asked Veronica what the Holy Spirit is doing in her church. She said something about sinners

being turned into saints and the person responded, “No, no, no. What’s the Holy Spirit *really* doing. What kinds of signs and wonders?” She was expecting one thing and as a result was blind to the kingdom here and the Spirit here and now. I’ve been told that I’m not filled with the Holy Spirit because I don’t speak in tongues. That person was so focused on one manifestation of the Spirit that all the others were missed. This is what Jesus is getting at. “The kingdom is in your midst,” he says. “It’s already here!” The Pharisees’ problem was that they had identified the wrong enemies: the enemy wasn’t Rome. The enemies are sin and death. And they were convinced that the Messiah’s mission was to judge and condemn, but Jesus came instead to redeem. That wasn’t on their radar and so they missed—the refused to accept—that Jesus was inaugurating the kingdom they’d been waiting so long for.

In verse 22 Jesus turns to the disciples. He knows that they’re just as mired in this wrong idea of the kingdom as the Pharisees are. He warns them:

“The days are coming when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. And they will say to you, ‘Look, there!’ or ‘Look, here!’ Do not go out or follow them. (Luke 17:22-23)

A day is coming when Jesus’ disciples will be longing to see their faith in Jesus vindicated. A lot of our obsession today with all things “end times” has to do with a desire to see our faith vindicated. Jesus promised that his people would suffer persecution for their faith. He also promised that we would be vindicated for standing firm. We long to be vindicated and we long for the life that Jesus promised. We’ve already seen that Jesus understood himself to be the Son of Man and that the idea of the Son of Man comes from Daniel 7. In Daniel’s prophecy the Son of Man is

the representative of true Israel. He describes the Son of Man being vindicated by the Ancient of Day—by the Father—and given dominion and glory and an everlasting kingdom of all nations and peoples after suffering for the saints. Daniel describes the pagan empires as ferocious and nightmarish beasts, but the Son of Man vanquishes them. That was the day the Jews looked for. That was the kingdom the Pharisees asked Jesus about. This is the day the disciples will long for in the midst of their own persecution: the day of the Son of Man, the day when he vindicates his people. And just like Christians today, they’ll be tempted to follow after the preachers who say, “Look here!” and “Look there!” They’ll be tempted to look for vindication in all the wrong places. And Jesus says: “Stop! Don’t listen to them. Don’t follow those preachers. Don’t follow those false prophets.”

For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day.

Preachers will finesse this or that interpretation from the Scriptures. Preachers will twist this or that prophecy to make it address the events of today. A friend who used to swim with me told me one day about a preacher who came to his church to teach about the “Bible code”. This “code” was some supposedly prophetic message about the end times secreted away in the Bible. My friend had bought into this message despite the fact that when I asked him about the details he couldn’t tell me a thing. This “code” was so complex that the preacher was apparently the only one who really had any grasp of it. There’s a lot of this kind of thing going around, brothers and sisters. Don’t listen to this nonsense. God gave us his Word so that we can know him, know what he expects of us, and know his plans. The idea that he would hide a secret code in his Word

that was so complex that it took two thousand years to find and that only one person understands runs completely contrary to the very purpose God had in giving us that Bible. No. Jesus tells his disciples not to listen to those sorts of preachers. When the day of the Son of Man comes it will be no secret; no one will have to tease it out of an obscure passage of Scripture. More importantly, it won’t happen over here or over there. Just the opposite: When it happens it will be as unmistakable as lightning lighting up the sky.

Now in verse 25, Jesus gets to the real rebuke and the real warning. In talking about the days of the Son of Man he’s brought the imagery of Daniel’s prophecy to their minds. They’re thinking about the Son of Man coming to judge and destroy the pagan empires—especially that fourth beast: Caesar and his empire. But Jesus tells them:

But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.

Before that day of vindication can come, the Son of Man must face suffering and be rejected. This is what Jesus is headed to Jerusalem to face. Whether he knew the details of how it was going to play out or not, Jesus knew that his kingdom was not coming by his violent overthrow of the Romans; his kingdom was coming as he suffered and died for his people at the hands of those he refers to here as “this generation”.

This generation isn’t the Romans. “This generation” was how the Lord describes the unfaithful Israelites as they grumbled at his goodness during the Exodus. And Jesus compares the Jews of his own day to their grumbling ancestors who were blind to God at work and who took his faithfulness for granted. In Chapter 11 Jesus compared “this generation” to those who rejected and killed the prophets. In that same passage he

rebukes “this generation” for seeking after signs. Because they went seeking after signs instead of repenting, Jesus says, they will miss the coming of the kingdom and face judgement and destruction. Now he says that “this generation” will be responsible for his suffering and his rejection. “This generation” is faithless Israel. Jesus puts faithless Israel in the place of the final beast of Daniel’s vision. And this generation will be judged for rejecting the Son of Man. When that judgement comes no one will be able to miss it, but it’s not coming with signs and portents. The people have proved themselves to be blind to God’s warnings anyway. Look at verses 26-30:

Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot—they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all—so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed.

Jesus compares “this generation” to the people of Noah’s day and to the people of Sodom—the two greatest Old Testament images of sinful people. The people of Noah’s day had fallen so entirely into sin that God, in his holy justice, was compelled to destroy them all. The men of Sodom were so sold out to sin that God was compelled to rain down fire and brimstone on their city. And now Israel has placed herself in the same position. She has repeatedly rejected the Lord. He sent prophets to call her back to himself, she but killed them and continued to prostitute herself to idols. And so in Jesus, God took up our flesh and came himself to preach

repentance to his people. And as they killed the prophets, Jesus says, they will kill the Son of Man. Despite all her shows of piety, at the cross Israel’s rejection of God comes to a head. Israel has placed herself, like Noah’s generation and the men of Sodom, in a position of such utter rebellion that God has no choice but to destroy her. But Jesus warns, just as no one in Noah’s day and no one in Sodom expected judgement, no one in Israel will expect it either. On the day it comes, the people will be going about their business and planning for the future completely unrepentant, completely oblivious to their sin and to God’s plan.

Jesus goes on:

On that day, let the one who is on the housetop, with his goods in the house, not come down to take them away, and likewise let the one who is in the field not turn back. Remember Lot’s wife. Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it. I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left.” (Luke 17:31-35)

The disciples won’t know anymore than anyone else when the day of judgement is coming, but when it does come, just as everyone recognises the flash of lightning in the sky, they’ll recognise the coming of the Son of Man in judgement. Everyone else will be scrambling to gather their precious belongings. But the disciples will recognise the coming of the Son of Man. Jesus tells them to flee on that day. Jesus tells them: Remember Lot’s wife. As she fled from Sodom, she turned to look back in longing at her lost home and was overcome by the storm of destruction, burned and crystallised in the tempest of fire and brimstone. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is more specific. In Chapter 24

he warns his disciples that when they see the Romans desecrating the temple it’s time to run for the hills and not look back.

In verse 35 Jesus puts a new spin on one of his favourite sayings: Those who try to preserve their lives will die and those who give their lives will live. He’s said this before in the context of cross-bearing and in that, Jesus is the first example: He gave his life for ours and now lives. He calls us to give up our lives and everything we have for his sake; in return for trusting him with our lives he promises life in return. Jesus says this again, but here it’s a call to leave everything behind. When judgement comes the faithless, in their worldliness, will be scrambling to save their worldly possessions, but Jesus tells his people: Run. Get out. Leave it all behind if you want to live, like Lot feeling Sodom.

When the Son of Man comes in judgement, all bets are off. It’s not worth risking staying behind and it’s not worth risking trying to save your possessions. As everyone goes about their business, whether sleeping or grinding wheat, one may die and another live—there’s no telling who, so be prepared to flee. These statements by Jesus are often taken out of context and turned upside-down: that those taken are the faithful ones “raptured” out of tribulation by Jesus and taken to heaven while everyone else is left behind to fend for themselves in a world without believers. Jesus is saying just the opposite. Those taken are those swept up in the destructive wave of coming judgement. Those left behind are the ones lucky enough to survive. But neither those taken nor those left are the saints; Jesus has already warned that his people are simply to run the destruction on the day of the Son of Man.

And this is precisely what the Jerusalem Church did when the

Romans came in A.D. 70. Both the Jewish historian Josephus and the Christian historian Eusebius tell us that the Christians in Jerusalem fled across the Jordan to Pella and escaped the city's destruction. Jesus' prophetic warning was fulfilled as God used the Romans to discipline unfaithful Israel and in doing so to vindicate both Jesus and the disciples—to vindicate the faithful Israel established around Jesus. And while Jesus is more explicit about the Romans in Matthew's Gospel, we see him hint at this in verse 37:

And they said to him, "Where, Lord?" He said to them, "Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather."

"Jesus, where will these things happen?" they ask. And he gives them an answer that points to Jerusalem and to the Romans. Jerusalem represents faithless Israel. It was the centre of Jewish life and it was where the temple was—representing a dead faith. Jerusalem was the corpse and there the "vultures" would gather. Greek doesn't have a word for what we call vulture. To them vultures were just another kind of eagle, so what Jesus actually says is "there the eagles will gather." The eagle was the symbol of Caesar and of imperial Rome, carried on the standards and on the armour of the Roman army. Rome was to be God's instrument of judgement.

Judgement was coming and the kingdom of God was already in the midst of the people. All anyone had to do was open his or her eyes, repent, and turn to Jesus in faith. If they keep waiting for the kingdom to come the way they had expected, they'll be caught up in the coming destruction. The kingdom is here *now*. That's a call to action. Some translations have Jesus saying not that "the kingdom is in your midst", but "the kingdom is within your grasp". I think that's stretching the Greek a bit far, but it

does make Jesus' point: the kingdom is already here so *take hold of it today!*

Brothers and sisters, the catastrophic events, the coming of the Son of Man, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the vindication of the kingdom all came almost two thousand years ago, but that doesn't change the fact that the kingdom is in *our* midst still—it's *within our grasp*. And today we await the vindication of the kingdom and the Son of Man not in terms of an army of Roman "eagles" swooping down in destruction, but of the final coming of Jesus, the Son of Man, at the end of the ages. The destruction of Jerusalem was merely a foretaste of the final judgement yet to come. It's hard to say what that day will look like. We certainly have no idea when it will take place. And on that day it's doubtful whether anyone will have a chance to run into the house to save their family or possessions. That judgement will be final. No one will be spared and left behind as in the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. On that day, only those who have taken hold of the kingdom will escape.

The warning for us today is the same as it was for the Jews and for the Pharisees and for the disciples: Stop speculating. Stop looking for signs. If you're still looking for the kingdom, you've missed the boat. If you're longing for Jesus to come to reward you and to smite your enemies, like the Jews, you've misunderstood the very nature of his ministry: he came not to condemn sinners, but to redeem them. In his death and resurrection Jesus has conquered sin and death. He ascended to the right hand of the Father and reigns today as Lord. Through his Spirit-filled Church he preaches good news to a world lost in darkness and subject to sin and death. The kingdom is *here*; the kingdom is *now*; and our mission as kingdom people, as the Church, is to be light in the darkness and life in the midst of death. Our mission is not to pursue endless speculation about the end, but

to pursue holiness today. Our mission is to proclaim that Jesus is Lord and to call sinners to repentance. Brothers and sisters, the kingdom of God has come, it's here in the midst of the world's darkness, but as St. Paul asks: How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? That's our mission. Let us live and let us proclaim the Good News.

Let us pray: Sovereign Lord our Heavenly Father we give you praise. You hold the world in your hands. In your perfect wisdom and goodness you have chosen to redeem sinners and have come yourself in Jesus to make us new and to restore us to your fellowship. When we're tempted to speculate about your plans for us, remind us, we pray, that your most important plan for us is redemption and holiness. Empower us with your Holy Spirit and spur us on in grace to pursue the holiness of your kingdom, to share your loving grace and mercy, and to proclaim to the world that your kingdom has come and that Jesus is Lord. We ask this through him who died and rose again for the sake of sinners. Amen.