

Sermon for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany

'And he went throughout all of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the Gospel of the kingdom.'

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The word 'kingdom' is strange to us. We associate it with the middle ages, or with the small handful of nations today that, for appearances sake, talk about having a king.

Yet if we do not understand what a king is, or what a kingdom is, how can we understand what is written, this *'Gospel of the kingdom.'* Or the proclamation of the prophet that *the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*

Since we live in something akin to a democracy, we shy away from the idea of having rulers. We speak of our government, our judges, laws, representatives, experts, presiders; but never rulers. We believe we have no rulers. After all, this is a free country, and we are a free people.

So when we hear of a 'king,' we think of an artifact of a bygone era, or perhaps of a character in a fantasy novel.

But perhaps we are deceived.

A king is first and foremost a man of war. He is a conqueror. With his armies, he enters a land, defeats whatever resistance there is to his will, and demands of the vanquished either fealty or death.

Fealty, which is just an old word for loyalty, is preferable to death, and so most choose to be loyal to the conquering king, rather than be killed by the same.

But this is a strange thing. The king demands loyalty. We would think he demands submission, obedience, that we accept his oppression. But this is not so. The king demands, loyalty; he demands our love.

And love the king we do, for whatever reason. He rules over his people, and his people love him in return. This is what it means to have a kingdom.

We indeed belong to a kingdom, all of us. For there is one that rules over this world, and one whom we love to rule over it. The name he gives himself is 'Lucifer,' 'the bearer of light.' We Christians know him rather as 'the accuser,' 'the divider,' 'the father of lies.'

Yet even we Christians cannot help but have an affection for this king who rules over this fallen world.

For he promises us every worldly delight in exchange for our fealty, our loyalty, our love.

Do you wish you had more? More money, more property, more status? The king of this world tells us to seize it by any means necessary. He does not demand you be kind or honest in satisfying your want for more. He only asks that while you satisfy it, you remain loyal to him. This is the sin of greed, which is a great virtue before the king of this world.

Do you desire pleasures, both great or small? Good tasting meals, entertaining movies, shows, sports, games, bread, circuses. This the king of the world encourages, that you indulge such trite pleasures always and often. This is the sin of gluttony, which is a great virtue before the king of this world.

Do you desire beauty, and to be able to do with the beautiful whatever you want? Whether that be in a person or on a screen or in a club? The king of this world does not frown on such unseemly things. In fact he smiles, knowing his subjects are enjoying themselves. This is the sin of lust, which is a great virtue before the king of this world.

Do you just want to get away from it all, work, family, the obligations that life brings, to friends to associates, to strangers? All those who always seem to be taking and taking and never giving back. Do you just want to do what you want to do? The king of this world approves of this too. He wants you have perfect

independence, with no need to care for others. This is the sin of sloth, which is a great virtue before the king of this world.

Do you demand justice? Against an unpleasant family member? An unpleasant coworker? An annoying friend? An unjust society? A corrupt government? Demand it, says this king, yell, scream, protest, until you get what you believe you deserve. He wants everyone to get what they have coming, good or bad. This is the sin of wrath, which is a great virtue before the king of this world.

See how benevolent the Light Bearer is, see how he offers you every indulgence your corrupt heart longs for. See how he showers you with pleasures, and holds no sin against you, not because he forgives them, but because he understands them, and upholds them.

See that this king really does rule over you, for we smile at receiving his benefits day upon day. And see that we love him for it. This love for King Lucifer is called Original Sin, which is the greatest virtue before the king of this world

Yet one comes, healing every disease and affliction. He comes casting out demons and those who have been seized.

He bears a crown of thorns, this one, for He has come to establish His own kingdom; to tear away the subjects of the king of this world, and make them loyal to Himself, to make them love Himself.

To those He conquers, He shows two options, fealty to heaven, or death in hell.

And to win the love of the conquered, he does not promise wealth, for that is greed.

He does not promise pleasure, for that is gluttony.

He does not promise dalliance, for that is lust.

He does not promise libertinism, for that is sloth.

He does not promise judgment, for that is wrath.

What He does promise is a life of suffering, servitude, chastity, asceticism, and war; war against your flesh, and war against the demons, who every day

tempt you with ten thousand beautiful things.

Such sounds like a miserable existence. So why would we be loyal to such a kingdom, and why should we ever love such a king?

The king of thorns, the Christ, the Son of God, promises one more thing: Himself, all that He has, and all that He is.

For before we loved him, he first loved us.

This is *the Gospel of the kingdom.*

'Repent therefore, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Isaiah 9:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-25.