



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Thy Kingdom Come”

Part III of the Lenten Sermon Series, “Pray Then in This Way.”

Isaiah 52:7, Matthew 4:17, 9:35-38

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If you are watching this service on Facebook Live, I think you know that it is a bit awkward to preach a sermon to an empty sanctuary. It reminds me of the time I was the preacher at a drive-in. A church in Jackson, MS invited me to preach. Their early service was held in the parking lot. Waiting for the service to begin, I stood in an elevated, glass-walled booth, with only a soloist and a technician beside me. I watched cars pull into the lot, and it was to those cars that I preached my sermon. No approving nods, no expressions of insight; not even sleepy eyes and nodding heads. In fact, right in front of my face was a microphone and a window just a foot or two away. Everything I said bounced off that window right back at me.

Right now, I am staring at an iPhone on a music stand. Before me are empty pews, except Doug Settles in the back recording this service for the *Second on the Mount* podcast.

But I know there is a congregation out there. Some might be watching this live on Facebook and others later might listen to the podcast. We also know there is a much broader community with whom we want very much to stay in connection, even as we are physically distanced from each other. Let's keep each other in our thoughts and prayers, let's keep communicating, and let's especially not forget those for whom isolation might be *particularly important*, but also for whom it might be *particularly difficult* to bear. It can be a cold embrace when one arm around you is vulnerability and the other arm around you is isolation.

Let's seek the embrace of the arms of God. Let's pray.



Prayer for Illumination:

Holy God, touch us with your Word of comfort and of hope. Speak to us through scripture and sermon, and through the conversation of prayer that is guided by the prayer Jesus taught us. Amen.

Isaiah 52:7:

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

Matthew 4:17:

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.**"

Matthew 9:35-38:

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "**The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.**"

Pray then like this:

"**Thy Kingdom come,
Thy Will be done,
on earth at it is in heaven.**"

What is it like in heaven?

Many have imagined heaven in this way: After St. Peter locates your name in the Book of Life and grants you entry through the pearly gates with his Keys to the Kingdom, you enter Paradise. You enjoy the music of angels whose choir lofts are clouds (Talk about downloading your music from the cloud!). You walk on streets paved with gold. One street leads to the mansion in which you'll live for eternity (with one's dwelling being a mansion, I guess the idea is that heaven is keeping distance from neighbors).

And there is this. You will finally *get to see God*. He's a man with flowing locks of gray, looking like a kind but strong grandfather. He'll be sitting on his majestic throne, wearing a jeweled crown on top of his bearded head. He might just invite you to sit beside him for a bit on one of the smaller thrones to his right and to his left.

The details of this picture of heaven are so widely known that its locations have become familiar staging areas for jokes. How many jokes have *you* heard about approaching the throne of



God or about seeking entrance at the pearly gates (a lot of them involve lawyers. *A lot of them involve preachers*).

You heard the one, haven't you, about the lawyer who shows up at the pearly gates?...

... Oh, never mind. A comic needs an audience and I don't have one... except for a few other people who have been known not to laugh at my jokes. But if you haven't heard the one about the two dogs and the cat coming before the throne of God, the next time you see me, ask me to tell it. The next time, that is, when I'm not with Millie. She's heard me tell it too many times.

You can find other portrayals of heaven that are not so wrinkled from so much handling. Google descriptions of heaven and you'll find plenty. Still, notice how many of them are based on the same assumption that is behind pearls, gold, mansions, jewels and an eternal life of leisure with music downloaded from the cloud. The assumption is this: You get in heaven *what you most want on earth*.

I mean, that's what makes it heaven, right? God wouldn't have a preference for gold over asphalt, dirt or pine straw so it has to be *about us*. What we want. We already know that by God's grace that in heaven we don't get what we *deserve*. But we do expect to get what we *desire*.

And then Jesus tells us to pray like this: “**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**”

That prayer sort of turns things upside down, doesn't it? Not my kingdom, but God's. Not my will—what I want—but God's will be done. Not my desire for what I hope to be *there*, but what God desires *here*.

For us to pray like this, we have to think of heaven not as being a place that is the fulfillment of our own fantasies, but think of heaven in the way the Bible speaks of the Kingdom of God; as a realm where God gets what God desires... of us... and among us.

Consider our passage from chapter 4 from Matthew's Gospel. This is where Jesus begins both a sermon and a career with these words: “**Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.**” Then, in the very next chapter of Matthew, Jesus begins preaching the *Sermon on the Mount* which is basically his description of what the Kingdom of Heaven is all about—not what it looks like when we get there, but what it looks like when heaven comes here.

I am going to serve up tiny servings from the *Sermon on the Mount*, but feel free to put some of your time in isolation to good use and read the whole sermon in chapters 5-7 in Matthew's Gospel. Here is some of what Jesus describes:

The Kingdom of God, Jesus says,
is where the poor in spirit are blessed.

It is where
those who mourn find comfort.

It is where
those who hunger for food,
but even more for God,
are filled.



It is where

those who are persecuted for the sake of what is right and true are vindicated.

It is where those who show mercy and compassion receive it,

where those who pray, know God's presence.

It is where peacemakers are celebrated as children of God.

The prophet Isaiah adds his own beatitude: "How beautiful are the feet of the

One who brings peace."

Children no longer losing their parents

and parents no longer losing their sons and daughters.

No longer destruction being down upon the heads

not only of those with weapons

but also on those who are in the way.

Getting back to Jesus' sermon, he says, "Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you." And then he adds, "so that you may be children of your Father in Heaven... so that you may be children living in the house of God."

So, what about this idea of heaven being a place of leisure? Oh my goodness, that is not the realm of God described by Jesus. No, he describes a kingdom requiring much relational work.

- Be salt and light in this world.
- Make some kind of witness in the way you bring spiritual value to other's lives.

Jesus goes into challenging detail.

- He talks about praying for others, not praying for show.
- He talks about going the extra mile,
 - adding a second garment to help the one who asks for one garment to stay warm.
- He talks about not ignoring those whose need is obvious, like beggars.

I could stop here and share my view that there are smart ways to help those asking for help and ways that are not smart, that perhaps the best way is to support those ministries in town that follow effective strategies. But strategy aside, let's not miss Jesus' simple point: don't be blind to need.

Jesus goes on in his sermon and talks about justice being a sign of the kingdom. In this case, he goes far beyond the idea of justice being the court punishing those who commit crimes, though he does speak of punishments. But as the ancient prophets did, he goes past punishment and correction to the beautiful end of justice achieved. It is where the final word of justice is mercy, its greatest expression is compassion and its most powerful enforcement is the internal compulsion of love.

Read through his *Sermon on the Mount*, and it is pretty obvious that when Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is at hand," those who heard him say it were not able to look down whatever road Jesus was standing beside to see a distant dust cloud rising from a caravan of wagons bringing the pearls, gold and building materials needed to construct the heaven of popular imagination.



What if those who heard Jesus say it were given the sight to look down the road of the life Jesus was yet to live, a road that leads to the cross? They would see Jesus living what he teaches and preaches. They would come to a place, for instance, where thousands are hungry. The disciples want to isolate themselves and ask Jesus to send them away. Instead, Jesus puts his followers to work, telling them to gather whatever loaves and fish they can gather so that the hungry can be fed.

You would come to other places where he has conversations with those from whom people of his background and faith isolate themselves: *that* woman, *that* tax collector, *that* sinner, *that* centurion. Jesus speaks to them. Jesus eats with them.

You would come to that place where Jesus might want to *isolate himself*. Why would he want to spend time with those who have power and authority who seem to only want to argue with him, ...and even some who could potentially harm him? Jesus engages them.

And you would come to those spots where he preaches and teaches about the weak, poor, condemned and sick needing to have good news brought to them.

Given the current state of things in our world, I want to stop and linger at one particular spot where Jesus brings good news to the sick.

Right after Jesus preaches his sermon about what the kingdom looks like, after he explains how it is relational—how it is about justice, compassion and mercy—he is put in a situation where he himself has to decide how he will practice what he preaches. I'll read what happens, and you'll have to excuse the past tense:

When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him, and there was a leper who came to him and knelt before him saying, 'Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.' He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, 'I do choose. Be made clean!' Immediately his leprosy was cleansed. Then Jesus said to him, 'See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.'"

Today, we would say that the one Jesus encounters has Hansen's Disease. In Jesus' day, they are called, "lepers." And it is because of the way lepers were treated in Jesus day that doctors no longer use the term. I'll stick with the term precisely because of its stigma.

Lepers have a disease that many are terrified to catch. They are permanently denied access to others and are forbidden to be near crowds. When approaching others, they have to yell, "**Unclean, unclean**" so no one will come near. They are called "the walking dead."

Talk about isolation. What happens to them is the opposite of what Jesus wants us to pray for: The Hell of isolation has come to their life on earth.

Now, let me say right now that I'm quite proud of how most all of us are doing what we have been advised to do and that is, for now, to practice social distancing.

Keep our distance from crowds,
keep special distance from each other,



and wash constantly so as not to be unclean.

I'm also quite glad that instead of these tactics being ways we are uncaring of others; they actually are ways to be loving and compassionate to each other.

Still, it is striking that Jesus, in healing the leper, heals the untouchable with touch. Heaven comes to earth because the leper who is most isolated and has reason to believe that he is beyond human connection is healed in a way to show that he has connection to Jesus, and through him, a connection to God.

Here's my message about asking for heaven to come to earth in this time of social distancing. Let's remember that there is no heaven without others. God wants a beautiful place where the pearls are justice, gold is reconciliation and neighborhoods are places not of isolation but of reconciled harmony. If you want those treasures, pray for them... and then be a part of heaven coming to earth by remaining connected to each other even during this time of physical separation. Call, write, run errands for those who can't for themselves. What we don't want to do, after all, is to make a *sacrament out of isolation*.

Mac McAnally, a country music artist, is one of my favorite songwriters. As one would expect of a country music artist, his songs often tell stories, and those stories are often based on personal experience. Mac's grandmother helped raise him. She taught him, comforted him, was there for him when he was sick. She was a woman of deep faith so some of what she taught him were the Bible's stories and the church's hymns. Mac remembered visiting her when he knew that she was dying and confined to her bed. He was with her so she would not feel so alone. And he found himself returning to her the stories and hymns to remind her that God would not leave her alone. His song, "Somewhere Nice Forever," is about one of his last visits with her, although in the song, he casts his grandmother as his mother.

Mama I know you're feelin' low
Let's feel low together
The doctors say it's time to go
Somewhere nice forever

There won't be no leukemia
They're gonna keep it out
There'll just be Redeeming Love
Like we sang about

And so, the song goes. You can listen to it yourself online, but it continues focusing on the relationship that the son and mother have had and on the relationship with God that came with the faith she shared with him.

Those relationships are pearls and gold in his life. The son doesn't want to lose them and so he says:



Mom it's hard to let you go
Promise when you get there
To think about me here below
Somewhere nice forever

And you think the song is coming to an end. The music slows down. But all of a sudden, the son sings one more song to his mother, and you know in the way he sings it that it is the way she used to sing to him.

Jesus loves me this I know
For the Bible tells me so
Little ones to him belong
They are weak, but he is strong

Remember that this song about a mother is based on Mac's memory of being by his grandmother's bedside, repeating back to her the stories and hymns of comfort and hope that she taught him. I suggest to you that what she did for him when he was young, and what he then did for her when she was about to be young again—being there for each other—is a glimpse of a prayer being answered, of heaven coming to earth.

Bothers and sisters in Christ, we may be, as they say, “socially distanced.” But let there be no separation in our love, in our concerns, in our prayers and in the ways we stay personally, if not physically, connected to each other...

and connected to those who are, for whatever reason, isolated in our world.

