

27 January 2008
Epiphany 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A Clash of Kingdoms”

Text: Matthew 4:12-25 (1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Isaiah 9:1-4)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

What if I told you that I believe the American way of life is doomed to destruction, that another kingdom is right now being formed in secret to take its place, that it is working, even now, subversively, and that I was working for that kingdom. What would you think?

Well what did you think it meant when you heard these words: *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*

Or how about these words that you pray: **“Thy kingdom come.”**

We talk about the kingdom of God all the time in the Church (in many and various ways), *but what does that mean?* If another kingdom of this world poised itself on the doorstep of America (like in World War 2) there would be a call to arms and a recognition of the clear and present danger. What about the kingdom of heaven, that is at hand? Is it a harmless, toothless kingdom? Peacefully co-existing with my own kingdom? Ask yourself: Do I live in my own kingdom much of the week, and the kingdom of God part of the week, and easily slip in and out between the two? *And is that okay?* Is your peaceful, easy way of life in no danger from this new and invading kingdom? How can this be?

What does Jesus mean when He says: *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand?”* How should we hear those words: like a visit from your dotting grandmother, or like an invasion is at hand?

Perhaps part of the confusion comes from a church that today has by-and-large been neutered. A church that changes and shifts its message to fit the culture, going along to maintain numbers and respectability. But that is not at all what Jesus has come to

do. For the kingdom of heaven is at hand to wage a war, and to overthrow not America or any of the political kingdoms of this world – those are not the enemy. The kingdom of heaven is at hand to overthrow THE kingdom of this world: the kingdom of satan. And it is a very real war. A fight for *your* life.

A surface reading of the Holy Gospel today doesn't really communicate that war. It sounds actually very *nice*. Jesus is coming to help people. He calls some followers, some disciples. He heals and does good. That's the Jesus everybody likes. Who's there when I need Him, but doesn't get in the way. . . . But re-read the Holy Gospel today with the thought of invasion in mind, and you get a whole new picture! For here is the light coming in the darkness – which is not just a metaphor, or a figure of speech! It is the *real* invasion of the Light into the kingdom of darkness and sin and death. Here is Jesus recruiting fellow subversives, whom He will now train in His methods of overthrowing this kingdom. And then Jesus begins casting out demons, loosening their grip on this world, and reversing the effects of sin. *The kingdom of heaven is at hand.*

Do you see it? In your own life? For that is where this battle is still today taking place. The prince of this world wants to keep you in his kingdom, and is trying to make you like himself: angry, hateful, selfish, bitter, lustful, greedy . . . and he is doing a pretty good job, isn't he? But you and your kingdom have been invaded, by the One who seeks to overthrow your old self and conform you to His image. The image we originally had in creation, before it was lost in sin. To create in you love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Gal 5) To give you His Spirit. To bring you into His kingdom. This is not “nice” Jesus, but deadly serious Jesus. Who has come to give you life.

For that's the difference, really, in these two kingdoms. The kingdom of satan, the kingdom of this world, leads only to death. The kingdom of God leads to life. Satan has done a good job in convincing us that our life is here in this world, in the things of this world, in the power and position, the grabbing and glory, the friends and fame of this world. Jesus has come to shine the light of His Word on those lies, and not only show us real life, but *give* us that life. To overthrow *our* kingdoms, and establish *His* kingdom. A kingdom of faith.

And He does so *subversively*. And while we usually think of that word in a negative sense, it is not meant so here. Rather, it is to say that instead of sending His army of angels in an all out, frontal, visible attack on satan and the sin in this world, He is

working in a more hidden way. Working victory through what looks like defeat. Working through the cross. Working not invisibly, but undermining our sin, our assumptions, our self-absorption, our kingdoms, our excuse-making selves, and turning us to Him, one person at a time. Snatching those dead in sin through the waters of Holy Baptism. Preaching His kingdom into enemy hearts. Exorcising demons through His Word of absolution. Strengthening His army through the forgiveness and faith of Holy Communion. In all these ways, breaking into the kingdom of this world – and into each of our kingdoms! – and weakening and undermining and triumphing, through the power of His cross. Killing the old Adam, the enemy sinner, in us, and raising a new man. Taking us out of this kingdom of death through His death, and into the kingdom of life through His resurrection from the dead. Establishing the kingdom of heaven, building His Church.

Now to the world, this looks not so bad. Foolish, in fact. But the reality is far different! For as St. Paul wrote: “*For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*” The power of God at work through Word and Sacrament. The power of God that may look weak, but is in fact at work, creating in us that which we were not before. The power of God in death and resurrection. The power of God, re-ordering our priorities; conforming us into the image of the Son. (Rom 8:29) The power of God, giving us faith, forgiving our sins.

And then calling us to follow. For we *are* all called to follow our King in His kingdom – *just not all in the same way*. Some, as we heard today as “*fishers of men*” – but also in many other ways, other vocations. And this is not Law – that we *have* to follow; but Gospel. To follow in the life He has given us. To follow because He has raised us from the death of our sins to a new life in Christ. To follow because He has given us the victory of His cross and we are now *able* to follow; turning from our old life and ways in repentance, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

And following, yes, for we are fellow subversives. Bringing the light and life of His Word into dark places. Places of sin and death. And some may be very dark, where you are! And your little light may not seem like much. But that’s not up to you. For you are following. Where Christ leads. Which means He’s already there. Bringing you along. Following. That He may work *in* you, and work *through* you, subversively slipping past the defenses of others, to bring His kingdom and life to all.

And He is. And so we pray not only **Thy kingdom come**, but also **lead us not into temptation**. That is, give us eyes of faith to see the battle rightly. To see our sin and see our Saviour and not be *deceived or mislead into false belief, despair, or other great shame and vice*. (Small Catechism, Explanation to the Sixth Petition) That we may repent. And then **deliver us from evil**. Establish us firmly and surely in Your kingdom, dear Saviour, your kingdom of life, which has no end. For only He can do it.

And He is. As surely as He went into the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali, so He has come to you, here. The same powerful Word, here for you. The same forgiveness, here for you. The same body and blood, that once walked those roads and hung on the cross, now here for you. *That you may be His own, and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness*. (Small Catechism, Explanation to the Second Article) That His life be your life, His victory your victory, and His kingdom your kingdom. Both now and forever.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

(The thoughts and ideas of a subversive kingdom from Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*. A book I highly recommend!)