



Meeting Jesus Again GOD WITH US

Luke 17:20-21

February 20, 2022

Last Friday, during a rare morning off in an even rarer empty house, I was engaged in two of my favorite hobbies simultaneously: cleaning floors and listening to podcasts. The floor was our kitchen floor, and the podcast was an interview with a 23-year-old man named Peter McIndoe who, in 2017, launched *Birds Aren't Real*, a satirical movement meant to parody the conspiracies that have taken the world by storm. McIndoe almost never breaks his chosen character—a citizen convinced that all birds are being systematically replaced by government drones and have been for decades now. But in this interview, he reflected on how the movement, which he began in total jest, has provided a whimsical outlet for those who are exasperated by the proliferation of mistruth, particularly online. This has been especially true among young adults who, as McIndoe describes himself, were “raised on the internet.” At one point during the interview, McIndoe used a metaphor that caused me to put down my mop and pick up my pen. He described this use of satire as “an igloo in a snowstorm—using the material from the chaos to create a shelter from it.” An igloo in a snowstorm.

I thought of that again when I read this morning's text from the Gospel of Luke, this brief exchange between Jesus and a group of Pharisees who have a question, a simple, straightforward question. We know that from the beginning of his ministry, Jesus has been teaching and preaching about the kingdom of God. He has done this in direct address, in sermons and teachings, in parables and stories, in reflections on his acts of healing and power. The Pharisees have heard this man—this teacher, this rabbi—talk about God's kingdom over and over again, and they want to know: *When* will this kingdom arrive? Now, it is *possible* that they simply want to be prepared, make sure their bags

are packed. But given the role that Pharisees often play in the gospels, I think a little skepticism is justified here. In fact, I imagine the question comes not with earnest voices but with rolling eyes or perhaps even pointing fingers. For the Pharisees, this is a “put up or shut up” kind of moment. When will your “kingdom” arrive, Jesus?

Of course, Jesus doesn't take the bait. He never takes the bait. Rather than directly reply, Jesus does what Jesus always does. He further muddies the waters. I imagine a grin as he answers that direct question, “Well, you can't see my kingdom... You can't point to my kingdom... And yet, it is right here with you.” It sounds to me a little bit like a riddle. What is not always visible, rarely obvious, but ever present? Answer: the kingdom of God.

For the Pharisees, that's one thing. But to those of us who have committed to following Jesus, who have spent the last several weeks opening our hearts and our minds to meet him again, to discover him afresh and anew, there is an essential message in these words. It's a message that turns conventional wisdom on its head, and it is this: When it comes to the kingdom of God, *believing is seeing*.

Trusting the words of Jesus is the first step to seeing that kingdom which is not always visible to the untrained eye, that presence which is not always obvious to the unsuspecting heart. Until we choose to take that leap of faith. And then we begin to see what we could never have seen before. The kingdom of God in every direction and in each encounter. The kingdom of God present even among *us*.

Believing is seeing. When our eyes are opened to the presence of God's kingdom, we will also hear the

awesome charge we have been given to make that kingdom visible for others. We will join our efforts to serve God's purpose in the world. We will pray "thy kingdom come" even as we do our part on its behalf.

You may have noticed this morning that I've been speaking about our *collective* responsibility—our common call—to see and serve God's reign. There is a scriptural reason for that. Some interpreters choose to translate Jesus' words here as, "The kingdom of God is *within* you." They shift the message to one of personal inner transformation, the divine light of God shining in every soul. And there are places in the gospels where such a reading seems just right to me. But here Jesus speaks to a gathering of Pharisees, and importantly, here Jesus uses a plural pronoun. Unfortunately, this is obscured in most English translations, but you are lucky enough to have a preacher from the South. We know how to express the plural form. Jesus says, "*The kingdom of God is within all y'all.*"

And that makes all the difference. None of us do this work alone. If we bear the realm of God at all, we bear it *together*. As *one* community of faith, we are carriers of God's kingdom. Whenever we are joined in common mission, when we choose unity over division, the kingdom of God that we seek is among *us*. When we believe it, we see it.

Over in Matthew, Jesus teaches his disciples, "First, as a top priority, above all else, first seek the kingdom of God." *See* the kingdom and your place within it. So here and now, how can we seek, and see, and be God's kingdom? How?

Remember, the answer is *Jesus*. In Jesus, we are given a glimpse of God's glory in human form. In Jesus, we see the embodiment of God's dream for the world. In Jesus, we hear God's will for the church. And what does that glory, that dream, look like? What does that will sound like? What do we see? What do we hear?

In Jesus, we see the power of servanthood, the transformative impact of compassion, the supremacy of love. In Jesus, we hear stories of children

welcomed, of outsiders included, of tables extended, and walls of hostility torn down. We hear stories of community formed and character shaped. We hear the voice of God, and *this* is what we hear: "My kingdom is among *you*." Now, I take it that this is a promise meant to comfort us *and* a responsibility we are called to bear. What if the body of Christ gave powerful witness to the kingdom of God, collectively and communally as one? What if we made kingdom vision not one priority among many but our top priority in here and then out there? What if we tuned out or toned down some other voices so that we can listen for the clear call of Christ to embody the kingdom here? What if we made it our number one priority?

It's not hard to imagine how that decision would change us. After all, believing is seeing.

I'll give you an example. This week I heard an interview with a researcher who has been listening to and learning from members of Gen Z. That's the cohort born between 1993 and 2010. Much of what he described from his research did not surprise me, and it won't surprise you either. A sense of ideological isolation, a growing lack of confidence in leaders and particularly in institutions, a deep and growing concern for the world, the globe—natural and political—that will be left to them in a few short years. But there was a specific observation that got my attention. When the members of Gen Z are asked about which economic theory they support, across the board they show a deep skepticism for *any* model and all the buzzwords attached to them. In the conversation, the researcher described how members of Gen Z have seen the dramatic detachment of financial matters from any sort of moral underpinnings. That is, they have observed and absorbed the message that material success is to be celebrated no matter the methods or means that enabled it, that the ends justify those means. They hear that ethical failures can be excused or ignored so long as profit margins soar. And they see the emptiness of such assumptions. They know firsthand how this detachment hurts *all of us*, as the gap

between rich and poor widens and the wealthy lack deep fulfillment no sum of money will ever bring. And so they wonder where the voice of virtue has gone. *Where has the voice of virtue gone?*

And I say, what an opportunity for the Church of Jesus Christ. We have an igloo in that snowstorm! We know because we have been taught and we believe that material gain divorced from moral foundation is empty at best. We know because we have learned and received the truth that our movement is rooted in gratitude for unearned grace, for unmerited love. The kingdom we proclaim is a place where the pure in heart are given holy vision, where the meek inherit the earth, where the merciful receive mercy, and the mourners are comforted. We believe that kingdom belongs to the poor in spirit. We have a message made for this moment and the God-given responsibility to share it and live it.

The Gospel of Matthew concludes in a dramatic mountaintop moment. Jesus, having been raised from the dead, gathers the eleven remaining disciples, and he commissions them for the work of ministry ahead of them. The final words of Matthew's Gospel are Jesus' last words to his friends on that mountaintop. *Remember, I am with all y'all, even to the end of the age.* The promise of Jesus, the presence of the kingdom, among us always.

On Thursday, I visited an igloo in the snowstorm. Early in the morning, Second Church member Scott Montross picked me up in the pouring rain and took me to the Near Eastside of Indianapolis. We pulled into a parking lot and climbed onto a loading dock. RecycleForce, a nonprofit that recycles electronic and industrial waste, a place where Scott shows up almost every morning and has for well over a decade as a volunteer. As we walked in, he spoke to each employee by name, shaking hands and making eye contact with each. We were there for the Circle meeting that takes place every morning at 8 o'clock. As we took our seats in the circle, Scott leaned over (actually, Scott has to lean down to me) and said, "Chris, every person in this circle—except me and I

presume you—was formerly incarcerated." You see, that's the other business at RecycleForce. That's the other recycling project in which they are engaged. Creating a stronger community by providing a fresh start for those who need one most. For the next 45 minutes, we listened to testimonies, words of encouragement, and direct challenge offered without any hint of judgment. Each first-time attendee to the circle is invited, compelled, to introduce themselves and to share one hope for this new chapter of life. The last man to speak in the circle had to be persuaded up to the microphone. Timid, he spoke softly and looked straight down. "I just got out yesterday. My one hope is to never go back. I have a chance now, and I'm not going to waste it. I can choose a different way." Encouraged by the others in the circle and now growing a little more comfortable and confident, the man leaned into the microphone and repeated those words, *"I am never going back."* Finished, he stepped back from the mic, and the room exploded in applause and shouts of affirmation. To be honest, it made me wish I could preach to that group every Sunday morning! When the meeting ended, I watched as three coworkers came to check in on the man who had spoken. And as we walked past, I overheard one of them offer him a pair of work boots. "You're going to need these now." A fresh start. A shelter from the chaos. A vision of God's dream in human form.

Remember what he said.
The kingdom of God is among you.
Just look. You'll find it.
Just believe, and you'll see it. Amen.