

BRING FORTH THE KINGDOM

Supplemental Worship Resource

*Based on the Curriculum for Fowler Camp and Retreat Center
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SUMMER 2011



*In the Kingdom of God, all faithfully come to worship the Lord.
In the Kingdom of God, all joyfully strive to please the Lord.
In the Kingdom of God, all peacefully thrive in the care of the Lord.
In the Kingdom of God, all are forever alive in the presence of the Lord.
The Kingdom of God is near.*

This worship resource is designed for use in the summer of 2011 by the churches of the Synod of Albany as a way for churches to participate, as whole congregations, in the ministry of Camp Fowler, as a way to enhance and encourage the ministry currently going on in Albany Synod churches, and as a way to thank our churches for their past and continuing support of the ministry of Fowler.

Thank you!

BRING FORTH THE KINGDOM: BRING FORTH THE KINGDOM

“The Kingdom of God is like....”
Mark 4:26-32

CALL TO WORSHIP

“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”

“Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”
(Mark 1:9-15)

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Leader: Before you, O Great God and Planter of Seeds, we humble ourselves and confess our sins. You have graciously scattered the seed of your Word among us, implanting in our hearts the knowledge, the love, and the joy, of your heavenly kingdom, yet we confess that we have not always allowed that seed to grow and bear fruit.

Leader: Lord, in your mercy,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: You have planted the knowledge of your kingdom within me, yet I have hardened my heart and have not received it, relying, rather, on my own understanding, rejecting your Word, your will, and your ways.

Leader: Lord, in your mercy,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: You have planted the love of your kingdom within me, yet I have not let it penetrate into the depths of my being, keeping a shallow faith so that I might reap some of the benefits of faith, but not have to give or care or change too much.

Leader: Lord, in your mercy,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: You have planted the joy of your kingdom within me, yet I have lived as if following and serving you were a heavy burden too great for me to bear and have choked out, rather than sharing with others, the joy of new life in Christ.

Leader: Lord, in your mercy,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: Merciful God, we ask your forgiveness for our unfruitfulness, and we pray that you will cultivate in us faithfulness to you and your kingdom so that we would receive the knowledge of your kingdom, love it deeply, and share widely its joy. May your kingdom grow great and strong within us, and may we bear the fruit of your kingdom in our lives. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

*“The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
As a father has compassion for his children,
so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.
For he knows how we were made;
he remembers that we are dust.
But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting
on those who fear him,
and his righteousness to children’s children,
to those who keep his covenant
and remember to do his commandments.”
(Psalm 103:8, 13-14, 17-18)*

CHILDREN’S SERMON

Mark 4:26-32

Tell or read for the children one or both of the parables of the seeds from Mark 4:26-32. Ask the children about their experience with seeds and with planting seeds, perhaps they have helped plant a garden, have scooped out pumpkin seeds before carving a pumpkin, or eaten sunflower seeds.

Have one or more types of seeds for the children to examine, emphasizing for the children the smallness of the seeds. It might be helpful to have some tree seeds (*maple, oak, elm, etc.*) and then point to a specific tree that the children could see outside a sanctuary window to help kids understand the great size difference between the size of the seed and the fully grown tree. You could also bring a full grown plant (*other than a tree*) that originated from a seed like the ones the children are examining into the sanctuary so that they can examine it as well to get an idea of how big something so small can become.

Tell the children that the Kingdom of God is like the smallest of the seeds you’ve brought. It might not seem like much right now, but planted in good soil, God will make it grow to be big and strong.

Bring some cups of soil (*one for each child*). Have each child plant a seed in the soil and water it. Tell them that you will look at them again over the course of the summer and see how big they will get. (*You will want to choose seeds to plant that germinate quickly so that there will be very noticeable growth over five weeks.*)

Put the cups in a conspicuous place where they will get enough light, where the children can see them, but where they won't get in the way or damaged. Don't forget to water them regularly!

PRIMARY TEXT

Mark 4:26-32

He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

SERMON SEEDS

The Kingdom of God is one of the main focal points of Jesus' teaching.

After his baptism, the Gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus began to preach and to proclaim the good news. According to Mark, Jesus' message was, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:15)

The coming Kingdom of God is a major piece of Christian theology. It represents the life to which we, as Christians, are called. It is the object of our hope. The Kingdom of God is that time and place where all things in the world are right once again, where all worship the Lord our God alone, where the goal of all is to please God, where all live in perfect harmony with God and creation, and where all live forever in the presence and care of the Lord. The Kingdom of God is a place of love and peace, of righteousness and justice, of joy and celebration.

I sometimes hear people talking about building the Kingdom of God. What people mean by this, I think, is that our efforts, good works, obedience, and love, help to increase or build up God's Kingdom here on earth. We build the Kingdom of God for God as we live out the calling which Christ has given us.

The parables of the seeds, which are this week's lesson, I think, portray a very different picture. It is not we who build a Kingdom for God. It is God who builds his Kingdom to be a place of comfort and shelter, a place of rest and home, for us.

The planter plants the seeds, but the planter doesn't *grow* the plants. The plants in the parable grow without any help and without any action on the part of the planter. He sleeps, and the plants grow. Likewise, in the parable of mustard seed, the seed is sown by a sower, but the plant grows up without reference to the one who planted.

This, Jesus says, is what the Kingdom of God is like. One plants the seed, another waters it, but it is God who gives the growth...God who gives the increase. It is God who grows his Kingdom to maturity.

Even though many of the lessons throughout this summer will deal primarily with how we, as Christians, can live out the values and vision of the Kingdom of God in our personal circles of influence, our communities, and our world, it is important to remember that the theme *Bring Forth the Kingdom* is not so much a challenge or provocation for the church to bring forth God's Kingdom in our world as it is

a prayer to the Lord God to bring *his* Kingdom forth, in its fullness, into the world...to restore and renew creation...to manifest his vision for a perfectly constructed and harmonious universe.

That being said, we do have a role to play. God does invite us, as his children and his workers, to participate with him in this great and glorious work. God invites us to receive the good news of the Kingdom of God and to scatter the seeds of his Word across the field of the world. Our efforts may not always seem like much in the grand scheme of the redemption of all creation, but God can do a lot with a little. Even the tiniest seed can become a great tree.

The movement of this lesson should be to inform or remind those gathered in worship that God builds and grows his Kingdom, that we are called, as Christians, to make scatter the good news of the Kingdom of God far and wide, and that God can take even the smallest act of obedience and turn it into a great bastion of hope and peace in his Kingdom.

Optional Resources

SONGS/MUSIC SUGGESTIONS

Bring Forth the Kingdom (Marty Haugen)

Seek Ye First (Karen Lafferty)

The Kingdom of God Is Justice and Joy (William Croft and Bryn Austin Rees)

Lord, Let My Heart Be Good Soil (Handt Hanson)

Gather Us In (Marty Haugen)

APPLICATIONS/CHALLENGES/PRACTICE

Think about in what ways are the choices you are making and the way in which you are living your life inhibit the growth of the Kingdom of God in you, in your life, and, therefore, in the world.

Identify:

- *What patterns and practices in your life make it difficult for the Kingdom of God to grow in you?*
- *What patterns of life or practices might make it easier for the Kingdom of God to grow in you?*

Choose *one* of the patterns or practices in your life that makes the growth of the Kingdom of God difficult and replace it with *one* of the patterns of life or practices that you think might make that growth easier.

Maintain the helpful pattern or practice throughout the study of the Kingdom of God (at least).

BRING FORTH THE KINGDOM: ALL JOYFULLY STRIVE TO PLEASE

*In the Kingdom of God, all joyfully STRIVE to please the Lord.
Isaiah 56:3-8*

CALL TO WORSHIP

“For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Colossians 1:9-14)

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Leader: Before you, O Great God and giver of gifts, we humble ourselves and confess our sins. Time after time, season after season, as a kind, loving, and generous parent, you have graciously showered blessings down upon us because you want us to be happy, yet we confess that we are a selfish and rebellious people, taking in your gifts and not considering how we might please you.

Leader: Lord, in your mercy,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: You have blessed me with life, provided me with all I have needed, and made me exceedingly glad, yet I have lived the life which you have given to me in ways which bring you great heartache, pain, and sadness.

Leader: Lord, in your mercy,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: You gave your best, your Son, yourself, so that I might have joy and happiness forever with you in your kingdom, yet I have given you scraps from my table, the change from the bottom of my pockets, and the leftovers of my life.

Leader: Lord, in your mercy,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: Merciful God, we ask your forgiveness for our efforts toward self-gratification, and we pray that you will cultivate in us faithfulness to you and your kingdom so that we would

learn to strive to please you through all we say and do. May your kingdom grow great and strong within us, and may we bear the fruit of your kingdom in our lives. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

"Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:31-33)

CHILDREN'S SERMON

Matthew 20:1-16

Tell or read for the children the parable of the laborers in the vineyard from Matthew 20:1-16. Better yet, have the children help you act it out or serve as characters from the story as you tell it.

You might make clocks to hang around their necks, to stick on their shirts, or to have them hold up to indicate at what time each child started. You may want to have some tools for them to be "using" as they work in the vineyard.

The emphasis of the story for this lesson should be on the reaction of those whom the owner calls to go work in the vineyard. They are excited to work. Not having any work to do made them unhappy, but being able to work makes them joyful. They enjoy being able to work.

Tell the children that the kingdom of God is like this. It is a joy to have been chosen by God to be one of his workers in the world. We have not been chosen to sit and leisurely enjoy the service of others, but we have been chosen to do a job. And the opportunity to work for God should bring us great joy and inspire us to work hard to make him happy.

PRIMARY TEXT

Isaiah 56:3-8

*Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say,
"The LORD will surely separate me from his people";
and do not let the eunuch say,
"I am just a dry tree."*

For thus says the LORD:

*To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,
I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.*

*And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,
to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD,*

*and to be his servants,
all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,
and hold fast my covenant --
these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.
Thus says the Lord GOD,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them
besides those already gathered.*

SERMON SEEDS

There are three main components to this lesson on the Kingdom of God.

The first component in this lesson is the understanding that we, as human beings, are called to please God...to make God happy. The world was created for God's pleasure. God created a million varieties of butterflies because it pleased him to do so. God created dinosaurs and killed them off because it pleased him to do so. God created human beings, giving us life, being, and authority over creation because it pleased him to do so. God calls men and women to faith in Christ because it pleases him to do so.

I think we don't often enough consider the pleasure of God as a primary motivator for a life of faithful obedience to his will. We are motivated by the fear of punishment for being bad or the joy of reward for being good. This, too, is probably a fault of our sinful, corrupted natures....always thinking of our own sense of pleasure, I suppose.

In fact, I think we don't often consider God as being capable of pleasure. We have been conditioned by Aristotle's belief in an "unmoved mover," by stalwart stoicism, by intellectualism, and deism, particularly in the North American Reformed tradition, not to think of God as an emotional being who responds emotionally to his creation.

Yet God is an emotional being, and God not only experiences pleasure, his pleasure is what explains all the things God does that we can't explain or really understand. God does things in the way that God does things because it pleases him to do things that way. Our purpose, as human beings, is to please God...to make God happy. That's why we were created in the first place.

As Christians, this is especially so. We are called, not only to make God happy, but to work hard to do so...to go out of our way to do things that make God happy. This is the second main component of the lesson: working hard at making God happy.

Last fall I coached a U-10 boys soccer team for AYSO. In AYSO, the score doesn't really matter. It's about playing the game, having fun, and learning skills. As an AYSO coach, my main goal is to see the boys play hard, play well, and develop their skills as soccer players. When I see boys' skills improving on the field, that's what makes me happy as a coach.

That doesn't just happen. It takes commitment on the part of the player to want to listen and learn and get better. It takes practice. It takes hard work, and the more diligently he works at it, the better

he gets. It makes me happy to see them working hard, playing well, and fully invested in the game, not sitting down on the field or watching something that's happening off the field.

The same is true of our relationship with God. The Holy Spirit is teaching and training us for life in the Kingdom of God, and God is pleased by our commitment and our hard work toward learning and practicing what the Spirit is teaching us.

It's not enough, however, that we work hard to make God happy. People work hard for all kinds of reasons, and don't necessarily enjoy the work they do. The work force is filled with people who do their jobs grudgingly and because they have to. This is not the way it should be in the Kingdom of God. Our work should bring us joy as well. This is the third main component of the lesson: joy in doing the work.

All throughout human history there have been cultures who enslaved other people to do their hardest and most demeaning work. These slaves, whether taken captive in war, taken captive and sold, or whether they were born into slavery, worked very hard to please their masters, not because it gave them joy to do so, but because they were afraid of the consequences if the master wasn't pleased.

What is most pleasing to God is when we happily, freely, and joyfully offer ourselves for his pleasure. God isn't looking for slaves who work hard trying to avoid punishment. God wants us to enjoy our lives and to offer ourselves freely and joyfully to his service.

The movement of this lesson should be to inform or remind those gathered in worship that we are called, as human beings and especially as Christians, to make God happy and to encourage all to joyfully strive to please God.

Optional Resources

SONGS/MUSIC SUGGESTIONS

Bring Forth the Kingdom (Marty Haugen)
God Whose Giving Knows No Ending (Robert L. Edwards)
Make a Joyful Noise (Jimmy Owens)
Joy to the world (Lowell Mason, Isaac Watts)
I've Got the Joy, Joy, Joy (Children's Song)
Cry of My Heart (Terry Butler)
Trading my Sorrows (Darrell Evans)
Jesus, All for Jesus (Robin Mark)
Earth and All Stars (Herbert Brokering, David Johnson)

CREATIVE OPTIONS

Give each person a copy of the *Bible Study Worksheet* (provided as Appendix A at the end of this resource). Then divide the congregation into smaller groups, and assign at least one of the following scripture passages to each small group to read (*Passages marked with * should be assigned first.*):

- Isaiah 56:3-8*
- Matthew 6:25-33*
- John 8:25-30
- Acts 13:48-52
- 2 Corinthians 5:6-10*
- Ephesians 5:6-14
- Colossians 1:9-14*
- 1 Thessalonians 2:1-4
- 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8*
- 2 Timothy 2:1-7*
- Hebrews 13:15-17

Have each small group read their passage together.

Have people fill out the first three questions together as a small group, then give them some time (about 10 minutes) to answer each of the other questions on the worksheet on their own. Then call the congregation back together, have them read their passage, and share some of their responses to the questions on the worksheet.

Choose a member of the congregation to help you with this lesson, preferably someone who can keep a straight face for a while. Have that individual sit in a chair near where the children are gathered. Inform the children that you're going to play a game called "*Won't You Please, Please Smile?*" The congregation member sits in a chair and attempts to keep from smiling while the children attempt, one at a time, to get him or her to smile by repeating the phrase:

"Honey, I know you love me, won't you please, please smile?"

The children may use any vocal intonation, may move around, may touch the individual (appropriately, of course), or use whatever other methods seem appropriate in his or her effort to get the sitting person to smile, but he or she cannot say anything except the phrase specified above. The child may say the phrase up to three times. If the child fails to make the individual smile,

choose another child to take his or her place. If the congregation member smiles, you may choose another congregation member to take his or her place.

If no children are able to make the individual smile, invite another member of the congregation to come up and try to make him or her smile, again using only the phrase specified above.

Emphasize for the children that if we really want to make someone happy, we will work very hard at it. The same is true for God. If we really want to make God happy, to please God, then we should work really hard at it, not necessarily because God is hard to please, but because that's how much we want to make him happy.

APPLICATIONS/CHALLENGES/PRACTICE

Think about a time when you had to work really hard to make someone happy (parent, teacher, spouse, etc.).

- Who were you doing the work for?
- How long did it take you to complete the work?
- How did you feel after you had completed the work?
- How do you think that person felt after you had completed the work?
- How often do you do work like this for this person?
- Would you be willing to do it again for that person or for someone else? Why or why not?

Then think about the effort you give in order to try and make God happy. How does it compare to the effort you just described?

Find joy in the everyday work that you do. Try to think of the job you do as something you are doing for God, and do the work as if you were doing it for God, giving it your very best effort, and with joy and satisfaction that you have striven to please God this week.

BRING FORTH THE KINGDOM: ALL ARE FOREVER ALIVE

*In the Kingdom of God, all are forever ALIVE in the presence of the Lord.
Revelation 21:1-8*

CALL TO WORSHIP

"Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out,

*'Hallelujah!
For the Lord our God
the Almighty reigns.
Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready;
to her it has been granted to be clothed
with fine linen, bright and pure'—*

for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

And the angel said to me, 'Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.' And he said to me, 'These are true words of God.'" (Revelation 19:6-9)

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Leader: Before you, O Great God of our salvation, we humble ourselves and confess our sins. You have promised those who follow Christ deliverance from evil, gracious salvation from the just punishment of our sins, and eternal life with you in your kingdom, yet we confess that we misrepresent and misunderstand your promise, we fail to provide for others what you have provided for us, and we have not trusted completely in your promise.

Leader: Lord, in your mercy,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: You have promised eternal life to those who follow Jesus Christ, the way, the truth, and the life, yet I have believed and professed before others that all will be saved, regardless of their relationship with Christ.

Leader: Lord, in your mercy,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: You have shown grace to me not holding my offenses against you against me, yet I have not shown the same grace and compassion to those who have hurt me or done wrong to me.

Leader: Lord, in your mercy,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: You have shown in the resurrection of your son, Jesus the Christ, that death is not the end for those who are faithful to you, yet I have been afraid to risk myself for his name and for your Word because I have doubted your power and your promise.

Leader: Lord, in your mercy,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: Merciful God, we ask your forgiveness for misunderstanding and misrepresentation of your promise, for not showing to others the grace which you have shown to us, and for doubting you, and we pray that you will cultivate in us faithfulness to you and your kingdom so that we may find assurance in your promises and draw strength from them to risk ourselves for you. May your kingdom grow great and strong within us, and may we bear the fruit of your kingdom in our lives. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:16-17)

CHILDREN’S SERMON

Matthew 22:1-10

Tell or read for the children the wedding banquet in the vineyard from Matthew 22:1-10. Better yet, have the children help you act it out or serve as characters from the story as you tell it.

The emphasis for this story today could be on the wedding banquet itself. In which case, you would want to present to the children the nature and idea of eternal life, talking with them about the comparison Jesus’ parable makes between the Kingdom of God and a wedding banquet. Emphasize the joy and celebration, even the eating and feasting that happens at wedding parties (*You probably want to make sure to mention the cake.*), comparing that to the joy and celebration of the Kingdom of God.

You might even have some cake (at coffee hour after worship or as a Sunday school snack) that day. You could show it to the children during the children’s sermon as a way to talk about the anticipation and excitement we, as Christians, feel as we wait for the Great Day to come.

The emphasis for this story today could also be on the invitations sent out to anyone who will come. In this case, you might talk to the children about invitations and parties. You might also have a collection of wedding invitations that invite people to the wedding banquet of the Lamb and his bride, and include some information about your church, worship times, Sunday school information, etc, on the inside, too. Encourage the children to give out the invitations after worship or Sunday school to anyone they want that week whom they know doesn’t regularly attend worship at your

church (family, friend, teammate, teacher, stranger, etc), telling the person to whom they give the invitation that he or she is invited to the wedding banquet of Jesus Christ.

PRIMARY TEXT

Revelation 21:1-8

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

*“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”*

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

SERMON SEEDS

Eternal life is one of the most significant aspects of scripture’s vision of the Kingdom of God.

Scripture, especially in the New Testament where the theology of the Kingdom is most fully developed, is replete with references and promises of eternal life. From Jesus’ oft quoted conversation with Nicodemus in John, chapter three, to Paul’s treatise on the doctrines of sin and salvation to the Roman church, to the glorious vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation, chapter twenty-one, the New Testament’s teaching can be summed up by John: “And this is what he has promised us, eternal life.”

(1 John 2:25)

As a race, we are consumed, consciously or unconsciously, with our own mortality. Whether we seek immortality through propagation or through cryogenics, we do so because we fear what Hamlet refers to as “that undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns.”

In our culture, there are countless methods and products to help us fend off death, or at least aging, the sign of death. Anti-aging creams and moisturizers, face-lifts, Botox injections, hair color for men and women litter the airwaves that we watch. Our culture desperately longs for youth and vitality. The recent interest in and explosion of vampirism I take as another sign of our culture’s yearning for eternal life...eternal youth and vitality.

Eternal life in the Kingdom of God is one of the basic teachings of the New Testament, yet the nature of that life and one's entry into it is one of the most misunderstood elements of contemporary thought, both outside and inside the church.

One dominant belief in our culture is that everyone lives forever. This is what we, as a culture, profess through countless variations of: "He is looking down on us...or watching out for us," or "Now she's in a better place." These expressions are meant as words of comfort, to family, friends, parents, and children, who have lost a loved one. While they often bring comfort, they also bring a false understanding of eternal life and entry into the Kingdom of God.

Another dominant belief in our culture is that eternal life is an ethereal life. Perhaps this is expressed as the belief that the physical body, which is unimportant and restrictive, is shed and people exist only as energy. Perhaps it is expressed as the belief that eternity is spent floating about in the clouds or in the light, with a warm sense of contentment and happiness and without a care in the world. While these expressions and others like them do reflect ancient Greek (and sometimes Gnostic) understanding of eternal life, they are not supported by the biblical witness.

Scripture presents us with an astounding vision of eternal life in the Kingdom of God.

Eternal life in the Kingdom of God is the hope to which we are called by God.

It is the gift of God for the people of God.

It is the promise of Jesus Christ and for which we are sealed by the Holy Spirit.

But eternal life in the Kingdom of God does not belong to everyone, nor are our physical bodies a prison from which we need to be released. The Bible expresses that the earth is good and that our physical bodies are God's handiwork. And scripture is quite clear that there are many who will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

The movement of this lesson should be to inform or remind those gathered for worship of the vision of the Kingdom of God as it is revealed in scripture; to inform or remind them of the hope of eternal life in the Kingdom of God found in Jesus Christ; and to encourage unbelievers toward faith in Christ or comfort believers in their faith.

Optional Resources

SONGS/MUSIC SUGGESTIONS

Bring Forth the Kingdom (Marty Haugen)
The River Is Here (Andy Park)
Amazing Grace (John Newton)
Days of Elijah (Robin Mark)
Now unto the King Eternal (Joey Holder)
Forever (Chris Tomlin)
We Will Dance (David Ruis)

CREATIVE OPTIONS

Show a scene from an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* entitled “Afterlife”. (“Afterlife” is the third episode of the sixth season of *Buffy*. The scene begins near the end of the episode at 37:47 in chapter 14 of that episode and runs through the end of the episode). Prepare the congregation for watching the clip by setting it up in this way:

“The clip you are about to watch is from the TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. In the clip, Buffy, who had previously died but has been brought back to life, is telling her friend Spike about what she experienced while she was dead. Pay close attention to how Buffy describes her experience of what it was like when she was dead, and what it is like for her now.”

Play the clip of from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. After the clip is over ask the congregation some of the following questions:

- What kind of words does Buffy use to describe what she experienced while she was dead?
- How did Buffy feel about being dead?
- What kind of words does Buffy use to describe the experience of being alive?
- How does Buffy feel about being alive?

Have a dry erase board or an easel and newsprint available to write down what the congregation remembers about Buffy’s description of what she experienced while she was dead.

Ask the congregation to make another list based on the scripture lesson from Revelation, chapter 21. Ask the congregation the following questions about the new heaven and new earth:

- What kinds of words and phrases are used to describe the new heaven and new earth? (make a list)
- Compare this list with the other list you compiled. What’s the same? What’s different?
- What’s significant about the differences?

Have the congregation get into small groups and ask people to describe what they imagine heaven is like. Ask the following questions:

- What does heaven look like?
- What are the people there like?
- Why do you imagine heaven in this way? What is shaping your imagination?

Ask the congregation to compare their imaginings to the images that scripture presents.

- How are they the same?
- How are they different?
- What do the differences mean?

APPLICATIONS/CHALLENGES/PRACTICE

In contemporary American culture, there is an ethereal, bodiless, otherworldly concept of what heaven will be like. Americans, as a whole, believe heaven to be a spiritual realm where disembodied souls dwell in joy, comfort, and tranquility after they have shed their earthly shells. They also believe this ethereal world to be the ultimate destination of all human beings. Here are a number of questions to consider this week:

- What is the significance that the New Jerusalem comes down from heaven to earth?
- We typically say that we will live with God for eternity, but the scripture passage from Revelation says that God will live with us. What, if any, significance is there to this difference?
- How are our common perceptions about eternity and the Kingdom of God related to our belief that we will live with God?
- How might our perceptions change about eternity if we accept that God will live with us?
- Why does God create a new earth?
- What, if any, is that place of animals in the Kingdom of God? Why do you say that?
- How is Revelation's presentation of the new heavens and the new earth a comfort to you?

Try to find a way to go and be the presence of God for a group of people or an individual, whether it's being a peacemaking presence at work, a supportive and caring presence for a friend, or declaring God's Word, God's will, and God's way to your family. Part of the emphasis is you going to the people you care about. Don't wait for them or make them come to you. You go to them.

BRING FORTH THE KINGDOM: ALL PEACEFULLY THRIVE

In the Kingdom of God, all are peacefully THRIVE in the care of the Lord.
Isaiah 11:1-9

CALL TO WORSHIP

“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”
(Colossians 3:12-17)

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Leader: Before you, O Great God and nurturer of our souls, we humble ourselves and confess our sins. You have instructed us in the ways of peace, yet we confess that we are not a peaceful people.

Leader: Lord, in your mercy,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: You have taught us to consider the interests of others before our own, yet I consistently look to my own interests at the expense of others.

Leader: Lord, in your mercy,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: You have taught us to use words that nurture and build up, yet I consistently tease, ridicule, and mock both those whom I love and those I can’t stand.

Leader: Lord, in your mercy,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: You have taught us to pray for our enemies and those who persecute us, yet I consistently look to see how I may undercut their positions, tear them down, and rid myself of them.

Leader: Lord, in your mercy,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: Merciful God, we ask your forgiveness for our slowness to learn the ways of your peaceful kingdom from the example you have given us in Christ Jesus, and we pray that you will cultivate in us faithfulness to you and your kingdom so that we be a peaceful presence in our violent and hateful world. May your kingdom grow great and strong within us, and may we bear the fruit of your kingdom in our lives. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

“For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind....The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain,” says the LORD.”
(Isaiah 65:17, 25)

CHILDREN’S SERMON

Matthew 18:23-35

Tell or read for the children the parable of the unforgiving servant from Matthew 18:23-35. Better yet, have the children help you act it out or serve as characters from the story as you tell it.

It would be best to present to the children some visual representation of the debt owed by each of these two servants. This could be done by using money (play or real), but it doesn’t have to be money. You could use objects of relative height, weight, or volume to communicate the difference between the debts owed by each servant. Give the children the chance to explore the two objects (i.e. feel their weight, height, volume, or count money, etc).

The emphasis for this story should be on the way we treat other people. We should be looking for opportunities to be kind and gracious and forgiving to the people around us, as God has been towards us. If we treat people harshly, if we harass them, if we are mean to them, if we make fun of them all the time because they are different from us or because they do things that seem silly or dumb to us, then we are not treating people the way God wants us to treat them. We are not treating people the way God has treated us.

God wants us to do to others as he has done to us. The words we say and the things we do to people affect them. Our words and actions can hurt them or help them. God helped us by being gracious and merciful to us, and he wants us to help others in the same way.

PRIMARY TEXT

Isaiah 11:1-9

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.*

*He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.*

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.*

SERMON SEEDS

One of the most common visions of the Kingdom of God in scripture is the vision of a peaceful, thriving creation. The images scripture presents to us of what has been called “the peaceable kingdom” are found in several of the Old Testament prophetic books.

The images found in the scripture lesson for the day—images of wolves lying with lambs, bears grazing with cows, lions eating straw like oxen, and infants and toddlers playing over the —are the images of a kingdom where, as God says, “they will not hurt or destroy” (Isaiah 11:9).

In my understanding of this element of scripture’s vision of the Kingdom of God, it’s not that all the big bads of the world are gone—God’s kingdom still includes wolves and lions and bears. What’s different is that all the big bad creatures of our world have lost their predatory instinct. In our world, a lion wouldn’t lie down with a lamb unless it was to tear the flesh from its bones. In our world, parents wouldn’t let their children play anywhere near the hole of a poisonous snake because the snake might strike at any moment.

In the Kingdom of God, however, the predatory instinct that drives the lion to tear his food apart and that drives the asp to strike down a potential meal is absent. Children play over snake holes because neither they nor their parents have any fear of the snake. Lambs lie down with wolves because they have no fear of their teeth.

In the Kingdom of God, scripture tells us, strong and powerful predators no longer prey on the weak and indefensible. They are no longer predators. They graze on grass and straw like all the rest.

I find this to be a helpful way to understand the peaceable kingdom because it gives us a tangible ideal that can be addressed with all people because, as we all know, the predatory instinct is not unique to wolves and lions and bears.

Most, if not all, of us have experienced the predatory instinct at work, either as a predator, as the prey, or, more likely, as both. Whether it's the cruelty of friends or classmates, the taunt of siblings, or the abuse of parents or other adults, every one of us probably knows what it feels like to be a sheep in the teeth of a wolf, and many of us also know what it's like to feel the sheep in our teeth. This is a point at which we can connect with the real need for a secure and safe environment that all of us need in order to flourish and thrive.

God's vision of the world is a world where every creature reaches its fullest potential—sheep and people alike. It is a world where the life that God intends for them is not cut short by the sharp teeth of a hungry predator, by being shoved and locked in a hallway locker, or by being ridiculed for any one of a plethora of reasons that people ridicule each other.

This piece of the vision of the Kingdom of God isn't just about not preying on the weak, it's also about stimulating and encouraging growth. In order to reach our fullest potential we need to be encouraged. We need to be fertilized. We need to be cared for and tended to with love and compassion and joy. We need to feel the safety and freedom to be that which God has created us to be and to live into God's calling on our lives in order to reach our fullest potential as Christian people.

As Christian people who are called on to live out the values of the Kingdom of God in this world, the value of a peaceful, caring, thriving environment is one that is both tangible and practical for believers, both at camp and at home.

The movement of this lesson should be to help those gathered for worship identify predatory instincts and actions that inhibit the growth of others, and to encourage them to care for others.

Optional Resources

SONGS/MUSIC SUGGESTIONS

Bring Forth the Kingdom (Marty Haugen)
Jesu, Jesu (Ghana Folk Song adapted by Tom Colvin)
They'll Know We Are Christians (Peter Scholtes)
The Potter's Hand (Darlene Zschech)
Will You Come and Follow Me (Ionia Community)
Lord, Reign in Me (Brenton Brown)
Let There Be Love (Dave Bilborough)
I Then Shall Live (Gloria Gaither and Jean Sibelius)

CREATIVE OPTIONS

Before worship begins, place a number of plants (or pictures of plants if real plants are not a viable option) around the sanctuary. The plants should be in a variety of states of health and vitality. There should be at least one plant that is flourishing and full, at least one that is nearly dead, and at least one or two more that are somewhere in the middle.

It may be beneficial to include plants (or pictures of plants) whose health and vitality is being or has been affected by an external source, such as thorns, vines, flooding, intense heat, etc. Be creative in your choice of plants.

After allowing the congregation to briefly study each plant (or picture) whether as a group or by allowing them to walk around on their own, ask the following questions:

- Which of these plants would you say are thriving? Why?
- What has caused a plant to thrive?
- What does it mean to “thrive”?
- Which of these plants would you say are not thriving?
- Why do you think they are not thriving? What causes a plant not to thrive?

APPLICATIONS/CHALLENGES/PRACTICE

If you see or hear someone being picked on, ridiculed, or mocked, this week at school, at work, at church, or wherever you are, make a point to stand beside that person and defend him or her against the attacks (physical or verbal) of those who are trying to hurt him or her. It doesn't matter who the person being attacked is (it may be your best friend or it may be someone you've never met before). Stand up for the prey.

Have the congregation make cards for someone they know that is hurting or is being preyed upon. Make sure people include in their card a portion of the scripture lesson or a summary of it or of what they've learned from it in the card.

Encourage congregation members that have identified him or herself as being predatory in some way or towards a particular person to make a card for that person or for someone else that he or she has hurt. Encourage them to offer an apology and an assurance that they will not hurt that individual any more, but will try to help them to thrive.

“ALL FAITHFULLY COME”

In the Kingdom of God, all faithfully COME to worship the Lord.

CALL TO WORSHIP

“Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice,

*“Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!”*

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,

*“To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might
forever and ever!”*

And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and worshiped.” (Revelation 5:11-14)

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Leader: Before you, O Great God and sovereign Lord, we humble ourselves and confess our sins. You have commanded us to have no other gods before you, to worship you and you alone, and to worship you in spirit and in truth, yet we confess that we have not worshipped you with the whole of our heart, mind and soul.

Leader: Lord, in your mercy,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: You have commanded us not to worship objects of our own making, yet I have shown more concern for this building, my television, and my career, than I have for your kingdom.

Leader: Lord, in your mercy,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: You have commanded us to worship you alone, yet I have put my trust in stock markets, I have given the best of my time and energy to myself, and I have given more to my cable company than to your church.

Leader: Lord, in your mercy,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: You have commanded us to worship you in spirit and in truth, yet I have repeatedly come before you with false humility and an empty performance of meaningful rituals.

Leader: Lord, in your mercy,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: Merciful God, we ask your forgiveness for our worship of false gods, our unfaithfulness to you, and our passionless and pretended worship, and we pray that you will cultivate in us faithfulness to you and your kingdom so that we may truly devote our hearts, minds, and souls, entirely to you. May your kingdom grow great and strong within us, and may we bear the fruit of your kingdom in our lives. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

*“While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.
Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,”
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.”*
(Psalm 32:3-5)

CHILDREN’S SERMON

Matthew 13:44-45

Tell or read for the children the parables of the treasure and pearl from Matthew 13:44-45. Better yet, have the children help you act it out or serve as characters from the story as you tell it.

It might be nice to have some gold coins (chocolate ones are always good) and a pearl, a white, pearlized marble, or something that looks like a pearl just to show the children what a pearl looks like. But as most children won’t really care about a pearl, it might also be a good idea to have something that you know one or more the children *really* want, and have a little auction.

Since most kids won’t have a lot of money, ask them to bid by offering services: “What would you *do* to get this?” Then let the auction go and see how far you can get. Obviously, the better or more popular item you have, the more exciting the bidding will likely be.

The emphasis for this story is on the extent to which someone will go to acquire something that is very important or valuable. Eternal life in the Kingdom of God is the most valuable treasure there is. How much are we willing to give or what are we willing to do to acquire it?

It’s important to emphasize to the kids that we cannot buy or work our way into the Kingdom of God (referring back to the invitations from last week might be appropriate here), but we work really hard or pay a lot of money for the things that are really valuable to us. How much effort are we willing to put in or how much work are we willing to do for the Kingdom of God?

PRIMARY TEXT(S)

Micah 4:1-5

In days to come

*the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised up above the hills.*

Peoples shall stream to it,

and many nations shall come and say:

*"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;*

that he may teach us his ways

and that we may walk in his paths."

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,

and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

He shall judge between many peoples,

and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;

they shall beat their swords into plowshares,

and their spears into pruning hooks;

nation shall not lift up sword against nation,

neither shall they learn war any more;

but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,

and no one shall make them afraid;

for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.

For all the peoples walk,

each in the name of its god,

but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God

forever and ever.

SERMON SEEDS

Worship is one of the primary elements of scripture's vision of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus Christ reveals to the church a vision of the heavenly throne room where "day and night without ceasing" the creation declares the glory of God (Revelation 4:8). And whenever they do this (which is constantly), the twenty-four elders, representing God's people, "fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing, 'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created'" (Revelation 4:10-11).

After the Lamb who was slain takes the scroll from the One seated on the throne, the living creatures and the elders sing, "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth" (Revelation 5:9-10). And a myriad of angels add their voices to the song, singing, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (Revelation 5:12).

John also regales for us the song sung by those who conquered the beast. It is the song of Moses and of the Lamb: "Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, King of the nations! Lord, who will not fear and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your judgments have been revealed" (Revelation 15:3-4). In the final chapter of the Revelation of Jesus Christ, we are told of the Holy City: "Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him" (Revelation 22:3).

Worship is a major theme of the Revelation of Jesus Christ.

Worship is about the worth, or worthiness, of God.

Worship is about declaring the sovereignty of God...that God is the creator of the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them...and worthy of our praise.

Worship is a way of life for both the people of God and, indeed, for all of creation.

God is worthy of praise and glory now and forever, therefore, worship is a major component of the vision of the Kingdom of God.

The lesson from Micah, chapter four, (along with its corresponding passage in Isaiah 2:1-4) speaks to us of worship in the Kingdom of God. It speaks to us of the enduring structure of worship, including the approach to God and the gathering of God's people, the proclamation of the Word of the Lord, and the response of God's people to his instruction. It speaks to us of the transformational purpose of worship.

The movement of this lesson is to teach those gathered for worship the enduring structure of worship; and to inform or remind them that corporate worship is a vital part of life in the Kingdom of God.

Optional Resources

SONGS/MUSIC SUGGESTIONS

Bring Forth the Kingdom (Marty Haugen)
O Worship the King (Robert Grant)
Sing Praise to God Who Reigns Above (Johann J. Schütz)
You're Worthy of My Praise (David Ruis)
Let Everything That Has Breath (Matt Redman)
Lord Most High (Don Harris)
Uyai Mose/Come, All You People (Alexander Gondo)
You Are My All in All (Dennis L. Jernigan)
The Heart of Worship (Matt Redman)
Here I Am to Worship (Tim Hughes)
Rise Up and Praise Him (Paul Baloche and Gary Sadler)
Ancient of Days (Jamie Harvill and Gary Sadler)
How Great Thou Art (Stuart K. Hine)

CREATIVE OPTIONS

Before the beginning of worship, write or print each of the following scaling statements on a separate sheet of paper and put them up around the sanctuary:

- I totally agree.
- I kind of agree or I used to agree.
- It's possible.
- I know people who think so, but not me.
- I would never think that.

One at a time, read some of the following "I statements" (*in no particular order*) and have people move to the scaling statement that best represents what they think or feel about the "I statement" and then ask two or three people why they chose the scaling statement that they did.

- Church isn't where I worship.
- I have experienced worship where I felt God was present.
- I don't like worship because somebody is always playing the organ.
- I like to worship by myself.
- I only come to church because somebody makes me.
- I would like to come to church every day.
- I think everybody should worship Jesus.
- I'd like coming to church if it weren't for the sermon.
- Worship is more than coming to church on Sunday morning.
- Worship services are too formal.
- I don't need other people to be a good Christian.
- I don't understand what happens in worship.
- I like Children's Church (or the children's sermon).
- I worship Jesus every day.

APPLICATIONS/CHALLENGES/PRACTICE

Make a commitment to come to worship every week for the rest of the year. Whether you are at home or away from home, you will worship with a Christian congregation every Sunday morning for the remainder of 2011 (or longer).

“THE KINGDOM IS NEAR”

The Kingdom of God is near.

CALL TO WORSHIP

(OPTION 1) *“One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.” (Mark 12:28-34)*

(OPTION 2) *“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”*

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” (Mark 1:9-15)

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Leader: Before you, O Great God, we humble ourselves and confess our sins. You have called us to repent and turn from our sins for your Kingdom is near, yet we confess that we have not fully believed your word and have continued in our sinful ways.

Leader: Lord, in your mercy,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: I have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, in what I have done and in what I have left undone.

Leader: Lord, in your mercy,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: I have not loved you with my whole heart and mind and strength.

Leader: Lord, in your mercy,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: I have not loved my neighbors as myself.

Leader: Lord, in your mercy,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: Merciful God, we believe, help our unbelief. We pray that you will cultivate in us faithfulness to you and your kingdom so that we may be true signs of the Kingdom of God in our world. May your kingdom grow great and strong within us, and may we bear the fruit of your kingdom in our lives. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

*“Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity
and passing over the transgression
of the remnant of your possession?
He does not retain his anger forever,
because he delights in showing clemency.
He will again have compassion upon us;
he will tread our iniquities under foot.
You will cast all our sins
into the depths of the sea.
You will show faithfulness to Jacob
and unswerving loyalty to Abraham,
as you have sworn to our ancestors
from the days of old.”*
(Micah 7:18-20)

CHILDREN’S SERMON

Mark 4:26-29

Tell or read for the children the parable of the growing seed from Mark 4:26-29.

Check in on the seeds that you planted during the children’s sermon on the first week of the series. Let the children examine their plants to see how much they have grown. *(Hopefully all or most of the plants will have sprouted by now so that there are green stalks and possibly small leaves there to examine.)* Talk with the children about what you did to the seeds during the last few weeks. After talking about how you cared for the seeds, ask the children if you caused the seeds to grow.

The emphasis of this story is that ultimately it is God who grows his Kingdom. The seed in the parable grew even though person who scattered the seed didn’t do anything to it. We may plant seeds, water them, give them sunlight, but we do not cause their growth, only God does that.

We may do many things in the service of the Kingdom of God, and there are many things that we can do to plant seeds or to provide a more nurturing environment for faith to grow, but the credit for the growth always belongs to God. We cannot make a seed grow. We plant and water, but God causes the increase.

PRIMARY TEXT (OPTION 1)

Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

SERMON SEEDS (OPTION 1)

Scripture presents the Kingdom of God as something that is, at the same time, both far and near.

The nearness of the Kingdom of God is the good news that Jesus proclaimed to the people who came to him day after day.

The Kingdom of God was what a people who were beaten down, oppressed, and unhappy longed to see. They wanted the promised Kingdom of God to come because they perceived in its coming, the end of all their heartaches, fears, and pain. Jesus' proclamation that the Kingdom of God had come near was welcome and joyous news to the people of Israel.

When people believe that some long-expected moment is at hand, they change. They prepare. They begin to align themselves with the expected moment. Consider for a moment preparing for a special event like prom.

In the month or two that precedes the big day, after you have asked or been asked to go, your activities are pretty much the same from day to day as they were before. You might go find a dress or a tux right away, but for the most part, you do the same stuff you did before you made the date. You go to school, do homework, unload the dishwasher, and all kinds of other regular stuff. But when the prom comes near, normal daily activities give way to prepare for the big event. The day of prom is spent getting your hair done, picking up corsages, and getting dressed. Your whole life changes to focus on this one event. Everything becomes about the prom.

The coming of the Kingdom of God is a big event and a cause for great celebration. Jesus' proclamation that the Kingdom has come near is a call to all people to make ready for the big day because it's coming soon.

Our preparation first involves repentance. Turning from the ways of the world...ways characterized by self-centeredness, predatory instincts and practices, destructive words and behaviors, and a general sense that each of us has within us the power and authority to decide what is right and good for us. These ways are antithetical to life in the Kingdom of God.

Our preparation must also involve belief in Jesus Christ...belief that, as the king of the Kingdom of God, his Word is law and should be followed. We must live out that belief with conviction, putting into practice the things which Jesus has taught us, which the Holy Spirit continues to teach us. We are called to live according to the values and mores of the Kingdom of God, even now.

As we learn to choose the good and reject the evil, we make ourselves more and more ready for the Kingdom of God. As we learn to choose the good and reject the evil, we make the Kingdom of God, more and more, a reality in our world.

The movement of this lesson is to inform or remind those gathered for worship that Jesus is the King of the Kingdom of God; to inform or remind them that the Kingdom of God can be lived into in the here and now; and to encourage all to repent and believe in Jesus Christ the King.

PRIMARY TEXT (OPTION 2)

Mark 12:28-34

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

SERMON SEEDS (OPTION 2)

When campers go back home to their normal lives and their normal routines, the life they experienced at camp soon begins to fade into the background. This may be particularly true of a theme relating to scripture's vision of the Kingdom of God. So much of that vision is yet to come, it can be hard, perhaps especially for children, to really comprehend that God's kingdom is also already here.

People are forgetful. When we are engaged in an intense time of learning and activity, like camp, where we are completely focused on a different way of life it is easy to adapt to the lessons we learn. When we return to the normal activities of daily life, going to work, paying bills, washing dishes, ferrying kids, those lessons tend to slip, as one of my college professors used to say, from our frontal lobes. They get pushed to the back where they are easily forgotten.

It's important for people to understand that while much of scripture's vision of the Kingdom of God is yet to be fulfilled, there are ways in which we can make the values of the Kingdom of God effective in our world. It's also important that we understand some practical ways that we can live under the reign of God as good citizens of God's kingdom.

Jesus tells the scribe in this scripture lesson, who recognizes that love of God and neighbor is more important than ceremonial sacrifices, that he is close to the Kingdom of God. Jesus says this probably in part because the scribe understands the importance of loving God and neighbor and probably partly because of his acceptance of Jesus' authoritative interpretation of the law.

Even though the Kingdom of God has not yet been fully realized, when we live out the values of the Kingdom of God, values like loving God and loving other people, then the Kingdom of God is realized in and through us. Just because the Kingdom of God isn't fully here doesn't mean we can't or shouldn't live like it is.

What is most important for this lesson is ensuring that those gathered for worship hear that while the Kingdom of God is not yet fully here, when we love God with all our hearts and commit ourselves to following in his ways, and when we show that same love to those around us, the Kingdom of God, with all its hope and promise, is near to us.

Jesus calls us to repent of our own sinful ways and believe that the Kingdom of God has come near. We need to be preparing ourselves for the big day when God's kingdom has fully come...when Jesus' call is no longer that the Kingdom of God has come *near*, but that the Kingdom of God is *here*. We can show our love of God by committing ourselves to following his Word, his will, and his ways. We can show our love for others by putting into the practice the ways and values of the Kingdom of God.

Encourage those gathered for worship not to forget the vision of the Kingdom of God which they have learned about throughout the study, and to put into practice the things they have learned. By doing this, they will prepare themselves for the coming of the Kingdom of God and be making the Kingdom of God a reality in the world.

Optional Resources

SONGS/MUSIC SUGGESTIONS

Bring Forth the Kingdom (Marty Haugen)
Let It Be Said of Us (Steve Fry)
Here I Am, Lord (Daniel L. Schutte)
I Then Shall Live (Gloria Gaither and Jean Sibelius)
Seek Ye First (Karen Lafferty)
The Kingdom of God Is Justice and Joy (William Croft and Bryn Austin Rees)
Lord, let My Heart Be Good Soil (Handt Hanson)
Gather Us In (Marty Haugen)

CREATIVE OPTIONS

These scripture passages reveal to us that the Kingdom of God is near. Ask people the following questions about the nearness of the Kingdom of God (*This could be done as small groups, but I would recommend doing at least some of it as a large group, particularly the first question and the review of the series' theme.*):

- Thinking about what we've learned about the Kingdom of God this summer, what is life like in the Kingdom of God?
- Why is the news that the Kingdom of God is near "good news"?
- Would you like to live in the Kingdom of God? Why?
- How can we prepare ourselves *now* to live in the Kingdom of God?

This conversation provides a few different opportunities:

First is an opportunity to present the congregation with Jesus' call to repent and believe in the Kingdom of God...that it is real, that it is coming, that it is near, and that Jesus is King. Jesus' proclamation is a call for all people to follow him. This may be an opportune time to *overtly* encourage and invite the people to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. (*Read here: some kind of "altar call", though it certainly wouldn't have to be that.*) It might be:

- to offer a prayer of dedication or rededication for all those who wish to receive it. A modification of the prayer used with the laying on of hands in the RCA's liturgy for profession of faith could be used: "Defend, O Lord, this, your servant..." etc.
- "If you have never made a commitment to follow Jesus before..." with elders or pastoral staff available to meet with people to talk and pray together.
- A verbalized invitation and call to follow Jesus and do as he taught us.

Secondly, this conversation also provides an opportunity to review everything that has been presented about life in the Kingdom of God throughout the summer, helping to solidify what the congregation has learned. A full treatment of the first question will hopefully help people recall the lessons of the summer.

Celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as a reminder of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God into our present reality.

APPLICATIONS/CHALLENGES/PRACTICE

Reflect on the major themes of the curriculum. This is how we get glimpses of the kingdom now, by living out the values of this vision. Each person can bring a taste of the kingdom into our present reality. Choose one or more of the values expressed in this vision of the Kingdom of God to intentionally work on more fully living out in the next year.