

“Thesis Statement” based on Psalm 65:5-12 and Mark 1:14-20

Sometimes it seems like my entire adult life has been about realizing that nothing works the way I thought it did, and everything is more broken than I had been lead to believe. Like the Psalmist, over and over again it has become clear what has seemed good, fair, and just wasn't even basically trustworthy upon further examination. In addition, I've learned that what people or organizations claim to be about often isn't directly correlated with what they actually DO.

One scholar summarizes Psalmist as saying, “No matter how weighty their social standing, we cannot depend on other people to provide security or stability in our lives.”¹ Another scholar takes it a step further, adding commentary to the Psalmist's ideas, “Every human effort, finite cause, and mortal relationship is an unsuitable object for our absolute trust and final hope. The career that shows so much promise, the children that seem so exceptional, the nation that appears so strong: they are like shifting sand which offers no security, no permanent purchase.”²

I don't think the Psalmist and I are alone in our desire to find trustworthiness in what can't offer “permanent purchase.” Often, when I hear people in their deepest struggles, they are struggling with a change they didn't foresee - something they thought was more permanent than it was – and the harshness of reality adds a significant sting to something already plenty difficult. Something in human nature expects more permanence than there is, and wants to trust in that permanence.

The Psalmist concludes that only God is as sturdy, steadfast, and worthy of hope and trust as we need. God is able to be our refuge, time and time again. God doesn't disappoint, and God is as permanent as we need. Best of all, God's nature is steadfast love, and it is on God's steadfast love as a platform, that we can build our lives.

Thanks be to God for that.

The thing is, I'm not sure it is all that easy for us to figure out what it means to trust God while remembering the impermanence of everything else. How do we balance the concepts that God is worthy of trust, but that doesn't mean our loved ones will all live long happy lives, our jobs will treat us fairly, our bodies will remain strong and healthy, our homes remain in tact, or that our spouses will always treat us well. (To name a few.) God is good and trustworthy, but life remains complicated. I think that this seemingly obvious reality is really hard to master!

Figuring out how to trust in God while being realistic about the world, and without becoming cynical about everything is pretty difficult. It is also very important, in fact, I think it IS adult faith development! That is, adult faith development is: trusting God, seeing the world clearly, and holding hope – all at the same time. Marcus Borg gives a model of how faith develops, and helps clarify the process all people have to go through:

Precritical naiveté is an early childhood state in which we take it for granted that whatever the significant authority figures in our lives tell us to be true is indeed true. In this state (if we grow up in a Christian setting), we simply hear the stories of the Bible as true stories. ...

Critical thinking begins in late childhood and early adolescence. One does not need to be an intellectual or go to college for this kind of thinking to develop. Rather, it is a natural stage of human development; everybody enters it. In this stage, consciously or quite unconsciously, we sift through what we learned as children to see how much of it we should keep. ...

Postcritical naiveté is the ability to hear the biblical stories once again as true stories, even as one knows that they may not be factually true and that their truth does not depend upon their factuality. ... Importantly, postcritical naiveté is not a return to precritical naiveté. It brings critical thinking with it. It does not reject the insights of historical criticism but integrates them into a larger whole.³

These ideas are larger than simply how we read the Bible. They apply to life in general. Pre-critical naiveté then, is trusting that God will make everything OK. Critical thinking comes when we acknowledge that lots of things aren't OK at all. And then post-critical naiveté is the time of trusting in God and seeing the world clearly and holding onto hope.

Now, I think that during his ministry, Jesus was clearly living in post-critical naiveté. He knew EXACTLY how broken things were AND he trusted in God and worked to make them better. If I'm honest, I tend to think of Jesus as being born in post-critical naiveté, but that's probably not really true! Mark says that Jesus came to Galilee (the location of the majority of his ministry) and started talking. He said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." Throughout all of my study of the Bible, I have come to believe that Jesus' words here are the thesis statement of his ministry, and thus of both the New Testament and the Body of Christ.

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." Because it can easily get confusing, let's review what repentance is. Repent most literally means, "turn around" or "change direction." I love my friend Rev. Dr. Barbara Thorington Green's take on it; she says it means to "turn around, look at God, look where God is looking, and refocus attention where God is looking." In context, then, repentance is calling people to turn away from the ways of the world (domination, oppression, competition, hierarchy, etc) and turn TO the ways of God (cooperation, collaboration, mutuality, support, solidarity, etc).

Because it is the key to everything about Jesus, let's review the idea of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is the world as God would have it be, when all people are able to survive and thrive, when abundance and sharing define the ways of life, when justice comes naturally to people, when things are exactly as they should be. That is, when we can look reality squarely in the eye and see nothing wrong at all. Building the kingdom of God was the work of Jesus, and is the work of the Body of Christ today. Our theologians tell us that it is both "fulfilled" and "not

here in entirely yet.” It is what God is working WITH us in creating, and it exists in moments and instances, but not yet as the earth's reality.

To be fair, I think this whole thesis statement, and in fact this whole kindom of God thing is a form of circular logic. That is, repenting and refocusing on God and on God's kindom IS the thing that builds the kindom – it doesn't happen unless people do it. Believing that God's way is good news, thus taking on the good news itself as a way of life is the way of making the good news into reality. Living as though the time is now is what fulfills the time.

I'm OK with it being circular logic though. Mostly because I believe it 😊 ;) I also think this means that paying attention to the stuff in life that ALREADY is a glimpse of the kindom is one of the ways that we build it. And I think it is fitting, somehow, that this system only works if we trust that it works – it feels like the rest of faith.

Or, to put it more succinctly, one scholar wrote, “Right away Jesus not only talks about the reign of God but enacts it.”⁴ This scholar explains himself saying, “Mark's brief account of the beginning of Jesus' Galilean ministry links Jesus' proclamation of the gospel with his calling of a band of disciples. These activities are by no means unrelated. Jesus' proclamation is not just a solo recitation of informative words but is an efficacious action that creates community and is taken up and continued by that community.”⁵ Now here is the key to it all. This same scholar says, “wherever Jesus was active, the time was fulfilled and the kingdom was present.”⁶

Now this caught my attention. If wherever Jesus was active, the time was therefore fulfilled and the kindom was therefore present, then does that mean that when we are truly acting out the ministry of Jesus – sharing God's love with our neighbors – that the kindom is present with us too? Are we able to, together, create the kindom of God – at least in small times and places?

I think we ARE!!!

I see it often enough. I see love being shared in extraordinary ways, I see transformation happening that doesn't really seem possible, I see hope created in the things we do together, as well as laughter and healing. I see the kindom when we are together as the Body of Christ, it really IS present and the time is fulfilled.

This is humbling to realize, although it is also inspiring! It does lead me to some new questions: when and how are we most successful in having kindom moments? When aren't we? How can we attend to them well so that we can appreciate them? What keeps us from creating even more kindom moments? How can we change those realities? Is the creating the kindom more work, or play? Is it about authenticity? Does it require community or can it happen with just one? Does it have to happen AND be noticed to have the most impact, or if we miss it, is it OK?

And finally, how is it that the kindom of God can co-exist in the world with the brokenness that is our current reality? (I think that's just a reality of non-linearity.)

If Jesus, in his life, made the kingdom into reality in his present; and if we as the Body of Christ continue his ministry in our shared lives; then we get to make the kingdom into reality in our present. How cool is that???

During the passing of the peace today, I ask that you talk to each other about the kingdom - when you've seen it, felt it, heard it – I think talking about it makes it even more real. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." And, keep on paying attention when you see the kingdom. Not only does it take away disillusionment, it also builds the kingdom itself. Thanks be to God. Amen

[1](#)Marsha Wilfong, Exegetical Reflections on Psalm 65:5-12 found in Feasting on the Word Year B Volume 1, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 275.

[2](#) Timothy A. Beach-Verhey, Theological Reflections on Psalm 65:5-12 found in Feasting on the Word Year B Volume 1, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 274.

[3](#)Marcus Borg, Reading the Bible Again for the First Time (HarperSanFrancisco: 2001) 49-50.

[4](#)Lee Barrett, Theological Reflections on Mark 1:14-20 found in Feasting on the Word Year B Volume 1, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 286.

[5](#)Barrett, 284.

[6](#)Barrett, 286.

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