

“A Taste of Heaven”

Introduction: It’s been thirty years since that first Christmas. It’s likely that Zechariah and Elizabeth are deceased. Joseph is retired and enjoying time with Mary and the grandchildren. The shepherds and the Magi have probably turned their responsibilities over to the next generation. John the Baptist, who came to prepare people for the arrival of Jesus, finds himself in prison for calling a local ruler named Herod Antipas to reform his immoral life.

So, that leaves Jesus, on center stage, ready to begin his ministry. Over the last couple of weeks, we’ve seen how, through his baptism, and then during the following days in the wilderness, he fought off the temptation to use his power to serve himself, declaring his willingness to go to the cross, for us.

But what happens until then? What happens between the apostle’s creed’s, “born of the Virgin Mary,” and “suffered under Pontius Pilate?” What does the life of Jesus reveal? What kind of King will he be? What kind of kingdom does he bring? As residents of a democracy, king and kingdom are strange notions for us and reading about the “royals” across the pond isn’t very helpful! So, let’s listen as Matthew sketches out for us what the beginning months of Jesus’ ministry looks like. Listen for the where, the who, and the how of the kingdom Jesus brings, all of which reveal the depth of his love for us. [READ]

I. Where does Jesus begin?

A. Jesus begins in Galilee. It’s a beautiful region, some 50 miles north of Jerusalem. It has a lake with clear sandy beaches and that is stocked with fish. It boasts rolling hillsides and picturesque mountains, areas of luscious agriculture, as well as a theatre, a stadium, and numerous mansions. And yet, to a devout Jew, Galilee was a very dark place. It was dark because it was filled with Gentiles—pagans, in other words, with their strange, ungodly practices. They had settled in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali, areas in which, after its conquest of the region in the 700’s BC, the kingdom of Assyria had resettled with its own people. Thus, somewhat like New England or the Pacific Northwest, physically Galilee was beautiful; spiritually not so much.

B. Yet, it was into this darkness that King Jesus came, and in this darkness where Jesus began to bring the light of the good news. This, actually, Matthew wants to make sure we know, is just what Isaiah had prophesied. While Zebulun and Naphtali were areas that had been humbled by the Assyrian conquest, this region, “Galilee of the Gentiles,” would be honored (Isa. 9:1). And now it was taking place: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned,” we remind ourselves sometime during each Christmas season. “For to us a child is born...” we go on to celebrate (Isa. 9:2-7). This king was not afraid of the dark; he had come to bring the light of his love into places that are dark. There is no place—no home, no neighborhood, no workplace, no school, no town, no region, no nation—where he refuses, or is afraid to go. What seems dark to you right now? Might you invite the king to go there with you?

II. With whom does he begin?

A. Well, if this king will go anywhere, Matthew tells readers that he will also begin with anyone, including, and especially, Gentiles, folks who were not descendants of Abraham or part of the covenant

community of God's people. This was not an easy pill for Jews to swallow, as Jesus' experience in his hometown of Nazareth revealed. Matthew simply says, "Leaving Nazareth" (4:13), but Luke expands on this piece of information, letting us know that Jesus was actually thrown out of Nazareth and almost tossed off a cliff by local Jews who knew Jesus as he had grown up there. The problem arose when, after preaching in their synagogue Jesus went on to speak of God's care for a poor widow who lived in Sidon, and God's healing of a man with leprosy who lived in Syria, even though there were plenty of poor widows and people with leprosy in Israel. Jesus highlighted these individuals to indicate that the grace of God would be made available to anyone, even "unclean" Gentile outsiders as well as to Jewish insiders (Lk. 4:14-30).

The light of his love, we might say, had come to dawn on all, as the mix of people Jesus would spend his time with would reveal – tax collectors, prostitutes, and other sinners, the gospel writers would notice. Much to the horror of the religious leaders, the kingdom that Jesus was bringing was open and available to any who repented, who were willing to change the direction of their lives and fall into step with him.

B. Matthew continues to highlight the surprising availability of Jesus' kingdom as he details the calling of the Twelve who Jesus invited to come and learn from him so that they could, in turn, spread the good news to others. What first century readers would notice is that those he selected were not the best and the brightest of rabbinic candidates but "uneducated, common men" (Ac. 4:13, ESV), as the religious leaders observed. This was a surprise not only due to their lack of qualifications, but also because it was highly irregular for a rabbi to call students to follow him. Instead, it was the practice for prospective students to approach a rabbi to see whether he would be willing to take the prospect on. Further, such an approach would only be done after the prospective student had spent years going through a rigorous system of qualifying tests to prove that he had the "right stuff" to possibly become what the rabbi was.

C. By way of contrast, it was Jesus who took the initiative with Simon, Andrew, James, and John. These guys were definitely not the best of the best. They probably wouldn't have even made the JV team. Yet Jesus reached out and drew them into his team, and, out of love, promised to grow them and use them for the fulfilling of his purposes. As Paul observes for the congregation in Corinth, this is the surprising way with our grace-filled God. He often chooses to bless and work through what seems to the world to be weak or foolish or powerless or despised (1 Cor. 1:26-29). And these men jumped at the chance to join him, not because of their great faith in him, but because it was as if someone actually, finally, believed in them!

Illustration: Do you remember middle school?! I remember moving at the end of 5th grade from Cleveland, where I had lots of wonderful friends, to Chicago, where I knew no one, moving, as well, from a parochial school to a public school. It was a much rougher crowd and I was just a gangly, rather uncoordinated kid who always got picked last when we split up into teams in gym class or on the playground. So when we had a flag football tournament at the school, imagine my surprise when one of the kids actually picked me first. His name was Derek, and he was the coolest of the bunch! Not only was he a terrific athlete, but he had those glasses made especially for playing sports, he had this amazing way of spitting through his teeth, and his dad was the orthopedic doc for the high school football team. As far as I was concerned, he had everything going for him. Somehow, he had noticed me playing catch and thought I could throw. So, we became a team. We'd stand in our little huddle and he'd spit a few times and then draw a "down and out" pattern on his hand, telling me which way he was going to cut. I

would then throw him the ball and we ended up winning the whole thing. When someone believes in you, when you know you are loved and wanted, it changes everything!

The king has come, he has come and is willing to make his kingdom available anywhere, and to anyone. How, then, do we see Jesus begin to reveal the presence of his kingdom?

III. How does Jesus begin?

A. Matthew sums it up with these words: “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people” (v. 23). Jesus began to reveal the presence of his kingdom in both word and in deed, ministering his healing power to both body and soul. We’ll consider his teaching when we jump back into the Sermon on the Mount next week. Before he goes there, Matthew notes that there’s nothing physically that’s beyond Jesus’ ability to heal, from various diseases, to severe pain, to demon-possession, to seizures, to paralysis. Through his healing, Jesus wasn’t seeking to be some ancient version of a traveling hospital. He was instead seeking to demonstrate his authority over all things, as well as his compassion for those who are suffering and the wholeness that he desires to bring.

B. We live, as we mention from time to time, in the “already/not yet,” when this preset age and the age to come don’t line up in exact sequence but overlap, when the light dawns but the sun is not yet fully risen, at the beginning of new creation with the resurrection of Jesus, but with that new creation not to be complete until his return and so death and mourning and crying and pain are still a part of our experience. So, as we wait for those things to be no more, these healings, and others that we experience like them, serve for us as a “taste of heaven,” a foretaste of the fullness of God’s new creation that lies ahead for us.

Illustration: They are like my time in the food court a few years ago at the Cape Cod Mall in Hyannis. We were looking to have a meal at either a Chinese, Japanese, or Cajun eatery. Each had a number of delicious looking dishes laid out behind glass counters. While we were wondering what each would taste like, a representative from each came up to us with a tray of samples on toothpicks and invited us to take and eat. While it wasn’t a full meal, the taste did curb my hunger and let me know what lay ahead and what I could look forward to.

The writer of Hebrews speaks of those who have “tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age” (Heb. 6:5). In Jesus, that which belongs to the future has broken into the present. While we are still looking forward to that glorious day when evil will be vanquished forever, we can begin to experience in small bites the new creation now, and to invite others to enter into step with the goodness of this Jesus. The king has come. He has made his kingdom available, anywhere and to anyone. And he is in the process of making all things, both body and soul, new again.