

“Bring the Kingdom Near”

June 18, 2023

Scripture: Exodus 19:2-8a; Matthew 9:35-10:8

The journey of Exodus is more than a mass movement of people from one location to another. No matter what the motive for that movement is, whether it's to escape oppression or to establish a new home or to find their fortune, the physical journey is really secondary to the spiritual journey the story represents. One question the Book of Exodus is trying to answer is, “Who are we as a nation, as a people, in relation to God?” Exodus represents the discovery of an identity. Through that journey, no matter where it ends, they become God's “treasured possession;” through it they become God's kingdom.

In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the mythologist Joseph Campbell describes the “hero's journey” as the path every person is invited to take to discover their true identity, their deeper selves. In those stories, through adventure and adversity, the hero is molded within and guided along as they become transformed into a source of wisdom and wealth for others when they return. The hero crosses the threshold between the material and spiritual worlds, between life and death, to bring riches back to the community and to usher others on the same journey.

For the people of Israel the Exodus is their hero journey. They endure hardships and setbacks; from time to time they stray from the path, are disciplined and led back. But finally they arrive at the land of promise, they enter their true home. And along the way they discover their true identity as God's people. God's purpose for them is to reveal the presence of God in the world. The Promised Land, while it's portrayed in scripture as a definable place, really isn't a physical place at all. The Promised Land is the presence of God in the world. It's that place within ourselves where God abides and that we bring with us in our encounters with others.

As we discover Jesus in the gospels, if we're looking with discerning eyes, we find that he too is on a journey and inviting those around him to follow. Jesus has been healing and teaching and casting out demons and generally making a name for himself throughout the region. He's called a number of people to join him. We find twelve listed in the gospel, but that may only be a fraction of those he's called. Not everyone is ready. So, he has this gathering of people and he's been showing them in various ways who he is and what he does. And then, out of the blue, he sends them out to do the same.

Jesus is responding to the crying need he sees all around him, a great harvest of souls longing for healing. He sends his disciples with the message, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” In this time they've been with him and learned from him, they've discovered something about themselves to give them authority over unclean spirits and the ability to bring healing. They have been infused with God's kingdom, they embody God's presence, and so bring the kingdom near wherever they go.

They are on a hero's journey, enjoying the benefits of it for now. In time they'll go through hardships and setbacks, betrayals and denials, but for now they are God's treasured

possessions, a priestly kingdom. Another way to think about it is to say right now, as they go from village to village, they are their deepest, truest selves. When we bring the kingdom near, that's what we become.

What Jesus is teaching his followers, and what Moses learns on Sinai at the feet of God, is we are meant to bring the kingdom near. That's why God engages us, calls and cajoles us. It's not so we can get into heaven; it's to bring heaven here. When you look at the hostility that exists in the world, the oppression, the cruelty, it can feel as though our only hope is to escape it all, to run away. But God refuses to do that. And God will not let us do it, either. Instead, God insists we face the world head on and journey through it bringing the kingdom near.

Jesus tells his disciples they do that when they cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. Those are some of the signs the kingdom is near. For us it may be more subtle. When we respond to hunger through donations to the UPC food pantry or preparing meals for Friends of Night People, we bring the kingdom near. When we advocate on behalf of people living in poverty by petitioning our representatives or working with the Western New York Homeless Coalition or contribute to Family Promise, we bring the kingdom near. When we support the work of the Family Justice Center by providing a safe place for women and children to find help as they escape domestic violence, we bring the kingdom near. When we stand with sisters and brothers of color whose lives are diminished because of racist systems and seek ways to make our society more just and fair, we bring the kingdom near. When we offer a place of welcome and acceptance and inclusion for folks who are rejected because of their gender identity or sexual orientation, we bring the kingdom near. When we reach out to one another in times of loss or illness or injury to offer care or a hot meal or a hug, we bring the kingdom near.

It's in doing these things that we discover our truest selves and live into our calling as God's treasured possessions. It's in doing these things, and so much more, that we discover we all carry within us the presence of God, regardless of where we're from, who we love, or how we worship. Jesus' words are an invitation to us all to join him on this journey of discovery and become the people God longs us all to be.

Amen