

**“Kingdom Come”  
Jeremiah 33:14-16 & Luke 21:25-36**

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**Jeremiah 33:14-16**

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

**Luke 21:25-36**

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

If you’ve been paying attention lately, and even if you haven’t, it’s hard not to notice the onslaught of Christmas. It all started, of course, almost immediately after Halloween. Don’t get me wrong, Thanksgiving is a wonderful holiday, but in terms of retail, there’s just not much to sell. And so on those first days of November, unsold costumes and spooky yard decorations made way in the stores for Christmas tree ornaments and plastic wreaths. Since then, Christmas’s annual takeover has swelled once again to receive the Black Friday swarms of shoppers. And so from now until the after-Christmas sales, the stores will be packed with all things Christmas, leaving many of us to wonder where in the world it could all possibly go once it’s bought.

And if you’ve been paying attention lately, and even if you haven’t, it’s hard not to notice that, despite the onslaught of Christmas, it’s “business as usual” for most of the world. Just yesterday an explosion derailed a train in Russia, killing 26 people and injuring many more, and preliminary reports suggest an act of terrorism. In the Philippines, details continue to flow from this week’s brutal massacre, where gunmen executed a group of journalists and their friends. Conflict continues in Israel and Palestine, and Wars rage on in Iraq and Afghanistan. On Thanksgiving Day, in the town of Iskandariya, just 25 miles south of Baghdad, a bomb went off in a crowded marketplace, killing two people and wounding a couple dozen more. That’s the

kind of news that's so shockingly commonplace these days that it comes and goes without much notice. Just another bland but violent news story to add to the list.

And here's the crazy part. In the midst of this chaos—in spite of the ever-increasing mountain of evidence suggesting that the violent world you and I were born into will be the same violent world when we're gone—in the midst of this chaos, we begin once again our annual approach to Christmas, and the manger, and the Christ child—the Prince of Peace. That's the crazy part, don't you think?—"crazy" in the sense that year after year after year we've been celebrating Christmas—celebrating the newborn Prince of Peace—celebrating those words that Amy read from Jeremiah, that "he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land"—celebrating that "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb"—celebrating nations beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks... Every year we're celebrating these things 'round Christmas, and every year the violent, chaotic world is proving us dead wrong. Sometimes I look at all those Christmas decorations and wonder if it really is just window dressing—a cheery distraction from a reality which is anything but "Joy to the World."

It may help to know that the violent world you and I inherited is the same violent world Jesus inherited long ago. CNN wasn't broadcasting back then, but it was hard not to notice a world that seemed to be falling apart before his very eyes. Had Jesus lived a long and happy life, he would have witnessed Rome's final brutality in Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. War, poverty, famine, destruction, political instability—these shaped daily reality for so many living in Jesus' time. In fact, things got so bad that there were many who simply could not imagine the world outlasting them—"Surely the end must be near," they thought.

And Jesus says to them, "When you see these things... when you see distress and confusion... when heaven and earth shake with violence... When the world falls apart, *know that the kingdom of God is near.*"

Really, Jesus? The kingdom of God is *near*? That's sort of an interesting choice of words. Some might look at it all and say that the kingdom of God is nowhere to be found, but you make it sound like it's just a step away.

And for Jesus, that's where the kingdom of God has always been. The kingdom of God is like yeast that a woman kneads into the dough to make bread—just a step away. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that a man planted in his field—just a step away. The kingdom of God is like a fisherman casting his nets and bringing in fish to sell and feed his family—it's just a step away—"It's here," he said, "the Kingdom of Heaven is here."

But we question that. In Russia, in the Philippines, Israel, and Palestine, in Afghanistan—we question that. In Iskandariya, 25 miles south of Baghdad on a routine Thursday in a crowded marketplace ripped apart by a violent explosion, we question whether or not the Kingdom of God is really here. Truth be told, Iskandariya is a place where it's hard to imagine the kingdom. It's a town of slums—homes made of mud brick and sheet metal—and its people live in poverty, day to day, meal to meal. The odd thing is that ordinary people in Iskandariya—men, women, and schoolchildren—folks just trying to survive—don't seem like very meaningful targets for a bomber. But three days ago, they were. Three days ago, someone planted explosives in a car,

parked it at the market, walked away, and then detonated them with a cell phone. Two people were killed and more were injured—some quite seriously. And they were just people—a woman buying bread, two men talking about the weather, a few children kicking a ball around while their mothers chatted. They were just people.

And so we could ask ourselves, what happened here? Did a man wake up one morning in Iraq and say to himself, “Gee, I think I’m going to bomb the market today”? No, of course not. Nobody does that. In reality, that man’s journey to last Thursday began long ago. It began with small steps of fear and mistrust. It began with small, initial steps that led him to believe that other people’s interests and opinions weren’t meaningful in light of his own. His journey to that bombing was a long one that continued with small daily steps, building a conviction in him that *no one listens to you unless you make them!* Every day another step, and then another—another prejudice and another hatred reinforced—each and every day, another step, for countless days... so that by the time last Thursday rolled around, the final step of putting a bomb together in his car was just *one more step...* In the end, pressing a button on his cell phone to make that bomb go off was nothing but another small step.

Here’s where you and I come in. Because we look at this destructive world we live in and ask ourselves, “How on earth can I do anything about this?” Right? In light of all that is violent and unruly and horrible on this planet, what am I supposed to do? What could I ever do that would make any meaningful difference?

But here’s a thought to consider: what if it really is just about small steps? What if your journey to making a difference in this world isn’t that different from the journey of the man who blew up his car in that marketplace? What if your journey, too, begins with a small, seemingly insignificant step—a first step down a different long road...

I was bummed when I heard that the Olympics weren’t coming to Chicago. I thought that would’ve been pretty neat—to have them so close. I would have loved to have seen a couple events myself, especially in gymnastics. I’m always moved and impressed by these gymnasts who condition themselves to perform such thrilling acts of strength and balance. One event that just amazes me is the rings—especially when the gymnast does the “iron cross.” Do you know what an iron cross is? It’s where the gymnast, dangling there in the air, pushes the rings out from his body and holds his body in the shape of a cross. Such unbelievable strength and control! A few years ago, I actually tried to convince some friends that if I dedicated my life to performing the iron cross, I would be able to do it within a year. They didn’t believe me. But, I argued, if I trained and trained, and watched what I ate and spent every waking hour focusing on that one task, I could do it.

Well, I didn’t do it. And there’s one pretty significant reason why: I don’t work out. I don’t practice. Generally, I don’t watch what I eat. During that year, I might not have even gone near a gym. In other words, I didn’t take any of the small steps I needed to take to prepare me to perform the iron cross.

An athlete who can do the iron cross, however, has taken hundreds and hundreds of thousands of steps to get to that point—so many steps, in fact, that the final step doesn’t seem so big.

Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is near.” And we’re all looking for it, all the while maybe wondering how on earth any reasonable person in a chaotic world like this one could actually believe such a thing. War, poverty, hunger, homelessness—these things rage on out of control, and it’s hard to imagine just how this kingdom is going to come about. But Jesus says, “The kingdom of God is *near*. It’s near. It’s like a woman who put yeast in her dough to make the bread rise—it’s just a step away.” Just a step. And then another. And then maybe hundreds and hundreds of thousands of steps...

Perhaps God’s kingdom come isn’t an all-at-once kind of thing. Maybe it begins with just a small step. A belief that a kind word embodies something of God’s goodness. A notion that bringing someone a bowl of soup when they’re sick really does change the world. A belief that peace on earth begins with peace in our hearts and in our homes. A trust that small steps—small acts of love and kindness, small movements towards justice, small gifts of our time and talent—that these small steps lead us down a path that reveals the God’s Kingdom Come as we move along!

There is freedom in this—freedom to know that our part in God’s work in this world is a part we can play today, because that’s how God’s kingdom comes—one step at a time. Amen.