

Kingdom People

May 4, 2014

Title: Kingdom Near, Kingdom Here

Text: Matthew 4:12-1

Summary:

Life or Death?

Life and Death on the Big Island

There's only one "Big Island." Not that there aren't a lot of large islands in the world. But way out in the center of the Pacific Ocean you find the "Big Island" of Hawaii. It's as big as the State of Connecticut, far larger than any of the other islands that make up the State of Hawaii. It was, and is still being, formed by a massive volcano rising up from the floor of the Pacific. From ocean floor to the summit of Mauna Kea, its highest peak, it measures 33,476 feet: making it the earth's highest mountain.

A visit to the Big Island brings you face to face with an ongoing story of life and death on a cosmic scale. The island began as a mountain of lava rising out of the sea. When the lava cooled plants colonized the volcanoes, creating lush tropical forests -- a South Pacific paradise if there ever was one.

But the volcanoes are still active. New eruptions send lava flows down the mountainsides and into the forests, burning and burying everything in their path. In a matter of hours thousands of years of jungle become a barren, uninhabitable wasteland.

And then the cycle begins anew: tiny plants find a foothold in cracks in the lava. Soon they are joined by grasses and shrubs. Eventually the entire lava field will be home to the same lush tropical forest that it had destroyed.

Every ounce of lava, every fern, every palm tree, every flowing stream is part of that great Life and Death story on the Big Island. And it's only by knowing the big story that you can understand them.

Israel's Story: Life or Death?

Reading the Bible is something like visiting the Big Island. You can only make sense of the bits and pieces of the Bible, the people and their stories, if you understand the bigger story. And in many ways the bigger story of God's chosen people, Israel, is like the Life and Death story of Hawaii.

Israel's story begins with God choosing to bring the fulness of His Life to a world that had become a spiritual wasteland. Like a lush paradise that has been destroyed and buried by molten rock, humanity had turned away from the Creator and its true identity

as His reflection and image. So how does the Creator go about restoring His Creation and the humans who are meant to tend and nurture it on His behalf? He starts *small*, with just 2 people -- a new "Adam and Eve," if you will. Their names: Abram and Sarai. Like those tiny ferns eking out an existence on sun-scorched lava flows, Abram and Sarai are the first "footholds" of the restored Creation that God is making. They are old; they are childless, they are wanderers with no permanent home. But they are willing to believe God's astounding promise that through them He will restore the human race!

Fast forward a thousand years and the tiny fern has become a lush paradise. God's people are established in their own land -- the same land that Abram/Abraham and Sarai/Sarah wandered in faith. God establishes a solemn treaty -- or covenant -- with them as a people. It goes like this:

Deuteronomy 30:15-18 NIV

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

In other words, they could *choose* to flourish like the lush tropical jungle on the Big Island. God would protect them from the "lava flows" of invasion, famine, drought and disease. But only if they, like their forefather Abraham, chose to be faithful to God. If not, then God would allow the "lava" to come and destroy their world. Like the lava raging through a forest, foreign invaders would come and wipe out everything precious to them, leaving nothing but smoking ruins.

Exile:

Israel proved unfaithful to God and His Covenant, resulting in the destruction of her land and the exile of her people. This is how the Bible summarizes the story:

2 Chronicles 36:18-20 NIV

God gave them all into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. He carried to Babylon all the articles from the temple of God, both large and small, and the treasures of the Lord's temple and the treasures of the king and his officials. They set fire to God's temple and broke down the wall of Jerusalem; they burned all the palaces and destroyed everything of value there.

He carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his successors until the kingdom of Persia came to power.

We can hardly begin to imagine the horror and disgrace of Israel's Exile. It was every bit as devastating as a river of molten rock gushing from the earth and consuming everything in its path. It must have seemed like the end of the world.

Kingdom Near!

The great promise:

And yet for all the horror and loss of the Exile, there was still a ray of hope. If Israel would return to God, He would once again restore her:

Deuteronomy 30:2-5 NIV

...when you and your children return to the Lord your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you.

Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you and bring you back. He will bring you to the land that belonged to your ancestors, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors.

Like new life taking root on a sun-scorched, barren sheet of lava, God would once again bring His people home and restore their fortunes. Once again, they would become His paradise, His royal garden.

Continued exile:

But it hadn't happened yet.

The Jewish people *were* restored to their ancient homeland, but they knew full well that God had not yet fully restored their fortunes. They lived under foreign rule. They were never masters of their fate. And their God was not yet recognized or honored in His world.

One empire after another rolled into town, like lava flows rushing down from a volcano: the Persians, the Greeks, and finally, the Romans. They knew themselves to be still living in Exile, still waiting for God to establish *His rule, His Kingdom*.

Kingdom near!

Imagine, then, what they must have thought when a rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth began announcing that the time had come.

Matthew tells Jesus' story in such a way as to anchor Him in the Big Story, God's Story.

He shows us Jesus coming into the Land of Promise, announcing that God's rule is at hand:

Matthew 4:13-17 NIV

Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali— to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah:

**“Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,
the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles—
the people living in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death
a light has dawned.”**

From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

Isaiah had written of that dark time when Israel would experience exile and loss. The beautiful forest would have been destroyed by the lava flow. But out of the darkness God would shine the light of a new day: He would send His own chosen Ruler to come and restore His world.

This is what Jesus was saying when He arrived in semi-pagan Galilee and announced: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." He was saying that the long time of exile was finally at an end. There was no need to look anywhere else. God was right here, right now.

Kingdom Here!

Kingdom where?

It's hard to stand on the lava of an ancient eruption, look out over thousand of acres of black rock baking in the tropical sun, and truly believe that a little fern 2" high that has taken root in a crack in the lava is the beginning of a lush tropical forest. That poor little fern looks like a lost soul growing vainly in an eternal desert. But the lush forest in the distance began just the same way.

I wonder what people thought when this rabbi from semi-pagan Galilee showed up making His bold announcement. No weapons or army to take on the Romans. No political connections with the power brokers in the big city. He didn't come with the blessing of the religious establishment. Just a ragtag band of followers that included fishermen, a tax collector, and even a revolutionary. Surely He was just one more visionary, doomed to being overwhelmed by the next eruption of Rome's power.

Kingdom here!

But look at what happened when He arrived in town:

Matthew 4:23-25 NIV

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them.

Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.

Here was a teacher who not only proclaimed that God's Rule was at the door, but brought God's Rule into reality. Here was God's Rule -- what Matthew calls the Kingdom, or Rule, of Heaven -- taking hold in places that no earthly realm could ever touch: disease, sickness, severe pain, demon-possession, seizures and paralysis.

Here was a Kingdom taking root in the hardest ground -- like plants rooting on bare rock.

And here was God's King daring people to believe that this was the time they had looked for. This was God's Time. That is why Matthew tells us He spent so much time teaching and proclaiming the "good news of the kingdom."

The Kingdom is near, the Kingdom is *here!*

Kingdom near, Kingdom here:

You and I are living in that same story. The Bible's long story did not end with the last page of Revelation or any of the Bible's many books. The volcanoes of sin, destruction and death still erupt in our world. They overwhelm whole societies and peoples. They overwhelm individuals and families. We can all look at places in our lives that have been

blighted by the brokenness of this world. We have all made choices that have contributed to our own sorrow.

But no matter how many miles thick the lava, Life takes root again. That is God's Good News: His Rule, His Kingdom, has come. He dares us to believe that the tiny beginnings in such needy places are just the beginning of something so wonderful and lush we could never imagine it in our wildest dreams.

But to do so means that we must *repent*. We must change how we think and how we act. We must start living the new reality.

Do you want to see the forest? Look for the tiny fern.