

A LIBERAL'S "KINGDOM OF GOD"

**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
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Advent begins today in the Western Church -- a month of preparation for Christmas, beginning soon after our great national holiday of Thanksgiving on Thursday and one of the biggest shopping days of the year on Friday. The holiday season is definitely underway.

The lectionary reading for today from Markⁱ asks us to be alert because the Son of Man is coming soon with great power and glory. It isn't referring to the imminent birth of the Christ child, however. This gospel reading has the adult Jesus telling us that there will soon be signs to come in nature -- the sun and moon will be darkened and the stars will fall from the sky. Then the Son of Man will come in the clouds with power and great glory. This is often described as the Second Coming of Christⁱⁱ, as distinguished from the first coming at Christmas. Many Christians have claimed that both Christ's birth and also dramatic apocalyptic changes to come on earth were foretold by the Hebrew prophets of old, like Isaiah. As you heard in this morning's Old Testament or Hebrew Bible readingⁱⁱⁱ, Isaiah asks God to tear open the heavens and come down to earth.

Jesus' first reported words in the gospel of Mark are "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near."^{iv} Later he says to the crowds who have been following him, "Truly, I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power."^v In today's gospel lesson, Jesus says "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place."

What exactly is this kingdom of God and how and when is it to be inaugurated here on earth? These questions have been discussed and debated within the Christian Church from the very start. The kingdom of God is described in a wide variety of ways in the New Testament, much of it in parables and sayings. Sometimes it seems to have a mystical meaning, referring to the presence of God. In other places, it seems to refer to a community of people. It also has a political meaning, referencing what life on earth would be like if God were king instead of human rulers. In that sense, as Biblical scholar Marcus Borg explains, "The Kingdom of God is about God's justice in contrast to the systematic injustices of the kingdoms and domination systems of the world."^{vi}

There also have been debates since the beginning on when the kingdom is to come on earth. Many in the early church, apparently including the epistle-writing Paul, the first three gospel writers, and the author of Revelation, expected that the kingdom would come in all its glory within a generation.^{vii} Most scholars now seem to believe that Jesus was announcing that the long-awaited kingdom of God was in fact breaking into history at his time, although looking different from what had been expected, and that it had both present and future aspects.^{viii} There tends to be a different emphasis now between conservative and liberal Christians, however, on whether they stress the worldly, present aspects of the in-breaking kingdom or its heavenly, future aspects. Or, perhaps better put, whether they stress the political or metaphysical aspects of the kingdom of God.

A major international Evangelical report^{ix}, for example, states, "Our Christian Hope focuses on the personal, visible and glorious return of our Lord Jesus Christ, on the resurrection of the dead, and on the perfected kingdom which his appearance will bring." There are three major positions on the so-called millennium in the conservative churches. Premillennialists

expect the Kingdom of God to be instituted after true Christian believers have been "raptured" up and away from everyone else on earth. Postmillennialists expect a gradual transition to a new age on earth as more and more people are converted to Christ, the Church grows, and society comes to be ruled by his teaching. "Amillennialists" expect the kingdom of God to come only in heaven and not on the earth.^x

Liberal or mainline Christians' view of the Kingdom of God, by contrast, has tended to stress that is something for the earth and that it has begun to operate in incipient form already. It has political implications. Jesus' primary audience was the peasant class in Israel,^{xi} and Mark reports that he spoke out against the powerful and wealthy as having more trouble getting into the Kingdom of God than a camel would have getting its body through the eye of a needle.^{xii} According to gospel writers Luke and Matthew, Jesus said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God."^{xiii} And, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."^{xiv} Last week I preached on a passage in which Jesus said that the inheritors of the Kingdom of God would be those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, take care of the sick, visit the imprisoned, and welcome the stranger.^{xv} This understanding of the Kingdom of God has clear social justice implications.

Liberal Christian scholar Marcus Borg asks what trying to live as part of the Kingdom of God means for us today. He answers that it specifically has to do with confronting unjust social systems -- most importantly, challenging "the way powerful and wealthy elites in our time...use their power and wealth to structure the economic system in their own narrow self-interest." In a book written in 2003, Borg cites data showing that "First, the amount of national wealth owned by the richest 1 percent of our population is increasingly dramatically [doubling between 1980 and 2000]. And second, the growing concentration of wealth in the hands of a few threatens

American democracy, simply because of the political power and influence that go with wealth."^{xvi}

Eight years later we now have an Occupy Wall Street movement challenging economic and social inequality, with a central slogan, "We are the 99%." Back in 2003 Marcus Borg called Christians to "participation in the political process in loyalty to the dream of God," and called "liberal politics" a synonym for "the politics of the Kingdom." Examples of "what taking the Kingdom of God seriously might mean for us in our time as Christians and residents of the United States," according to this biblical scholar, included the following policy areas, although he made it clear "I do not think being Christian provides any particular guidance about details":

1) Enacting a system of health care for the uninsured; 2) Being effective stewards of the environment and the nonhuman world, based on the biblical understanding of creation; 3) Promoting economic justice both domestically and internationally -- not absolute equality, but commitment to the material essentials of life for all and progressively reducing the gap between rich and poor; 4) Limiting our use of imperial power, especially as the world's military superpower -- at the very least acting according to Christian just war principles.^{xvii}

So, how are liberal Christians doing today in relation to what might be called the central Kingdom movement of our time in America, the Occupy Wall Street movement? I'm proud that my colleague, the Rev. Joanne Sanders, preached a sermon^{xviii} about the movement from this pulpit in mid-October, asking if we are ready to change and to control a new conversation. She started by citing Nobel prize winning economist Paul Krugman's *New York Times* column the previous week, which described how "wealthy Americans who benefit hugely from a system rigged in their favor react with hysteria to anyone who points out how rigged the system is."^{xix} After discussing the gospel reading calling to "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's

and to God the things that are God's," Joanne ended by explaining the current involvement of last winter's visiting preacher here in Memorial Church, the Rev. Dr. Donna Schaper, in the Occupy Wall Street movement -- bringing a replica of the golden calf of Mount Sinai fame from her Judson Memorial Church in Manhattan to Wall Street and then participating in a multifaith service there, which featured the golden rule in contrast to the golden calf.

There have been a variety of clergy and religiously-engaged people at Occupy Wall Street since early October. According to the journal *Christian Century*, a group of "Protest Chaplains", travelling down from Boston, have made news there, along with representatives of Brooklyn Congregations United, a grassroots interfaith group assisting those facing bank foreclosures on their homes. Also mentioned in relation to Occupy campaigns in other cities are Chicago-based Interfaith Worker Justice, the Palisades Community Church in Washington, D.C., and Muslim and Jewish religious leaders from Harvard at Occupy Boston.

However, the *Christian Century* article also mentions how surprised many Occupy Movement participants are to find religious people among them wearing white robes, singing hymns, and holding signs reading "Blessed are the Poor." It's pointed out that "Religious protesters, once a staple of American progressivism, have become a rare sight at liberal demonstrations in recent years."^{xx}

A *Los Angeles Times* article several weeks ago described Occupy L.A. as a revival without much religion. It explained how Christian philosopher Cornell West in a speech there had called for recognition of "our prophetic Mormon brothers and sisters," as well as Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and "black Baptists like myself." There was polite applause. But the biggest roars came when Dr. West referenced "progressive agnostic and atheistic brothers and sisters." The article noted how this illustrates the largely secular underpinnings of the Occupy

Movement and is a challenge that now faces the religious left. The Occupy camps have some elements of a religious revival, with an all-embracing idealism, daily rituals, and a focus that transcends the individual self. However, public religion in recent decades has been seen on the political right -- for example, in opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage -- but politics on the left has become largely secular.^{xxi}

Religious liberals, who worked to extend civil rights to African Americans, fight poverty, and end the war in Vietnam in the 50's, 60's and 70's, seem to have turned inward and largely abandoned politics and the public square in the 80's, 90's and first decade of the 21st century. There's not much of a coherent social message from religious liberals, and the religious left is largely disorganized. A Columbia University professor who writes about Evangelical conservatives says that "the religious left has lost its voice, has lost its nerve, [and] is no longer articulating the principles in the New Testament." Another longtime scholar of religion and politics in Akron, Ohio, asks "Where are the mainline Protestants? ...There's been relatively little denominational involvement [in the Occupy Movement]."^{xxii}

The *L.A. Times* notes that the primary signs of spirituality at Occupy Los Angeles have been a Buddhist meditation tent and a Jewish sukkah. Episcopalians from All Saints in Pasadena and Unitarian Universalists from the Community Church of Santa Monica have also been spotted, but that's about it. The Executive Director of a major strategy center called Faith in Public Life feels that the Occupy Movement could in fact become a rallying point for reinvigorating the religious left. "Like a lot of things...it takes a while for churches to get organized," she says, "But you are seeing folks get organized... There's a natural fit there, in other words. These values are our values."^{xxiii} Kingdom values, as Marcus Borg would remind us.

I have to admit to being part of the problem of the religious left myself. I haven't been at any of the Occupy Movement sites in the Bay area, although there definitely has been a religious presence at all of them. The area of involvement that looks most immediately fruitful for Rev. Joanne Sanders, Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neumann and myself is right here on this campus. Today a public announcement will be made of a program organized by Stanford faculty and students, with which all three of us have been involved, called "Occupy the Future." It's intended to help build this movement beyond encampments in parks and other public spaces. Starting tomorrow, there will be a release of a short article each day on the principles of the movement by different Stanford faculty, leading up to in a teach-in and rally on White Plaza on Friday, December 9. In turn, this will point toward an ongoing "Occupy the Future" forum at Stanford in the winter quarter. Four main issues are motivating these activities: growing economic inequality in America, associated corruption, a democracy increasingly skewed by money, and mounting obstruction of environmental sustainability efforts by wealthy interests.

I hope all of you will follow these Stanford efforts and also get involved yourself if you think it's appropriate. For liberal Christians at least, this may be the current area where those of us who so identify can align with the in-breaking Kingdom of God in the world. As Marcus Borg has explained, "The Kingdom of God is about God's justice in contrast to the systematic injustices of the kingdoms and domination systems of the world."^{xxiv} To live in a Kingdom of God ethic is to challenge "the way powerful and wealthy elites in our time...use their power and wealth to structure the economic system in their own narrow self-interest."^{xxv} Jesus was indeed reported to have said, "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God,"^{xxvi} and "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."^{xxvii} And Jesus taught us to pray to God, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven... For thine is the kingdom, and the

power, and the glory, for ever and ever.^{xxviii} May we so pray, and may we act accordingly.
Amen.

BENEDICTION

This Advent, O God, may we break the patterns which bind us to small commitments and to the stale answers we have given to questions of no importance. Let the Advent trumpet blow; let the walls of our defenses crumble, and make a place in our lives for the freshness of your love, well lived in Jesus the Christ. AMEN.

(Adapted from John W. Vannorsdall)

NOTES

ⁱ Mark 13: 24-37.

ⁱⁱ Although the term "Son of Man" has been subject to intense scholarly debate, see *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. IX, p. 200, for an explanation that Luke's Christian readers understood the title as a reference to Jesus. See also Marcus Borg, "The Second Coming Then and Now" in Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), p. 191.

ⁱⁱⁱ Isaiah 64:1-9.

^{iv} Mark 1:15.

^v Mark 9:1.

^{vi} Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), pp. 132-133.

^{vii} Marcus Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), pp. 255-256.

^{viii} Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), pp. 35-37, 74-75.

^{ix} Report of the International Evangelical Leaders Consultation (Grand Rapids, MI, 1982) as reported in David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 275.

^x *Ibid.*, p. 278.

^{xi} Borg, *Heart of Christianity*, p. 133.

^{xii} Mark 10:25 (See also Matthew 19:24).

^{xiii} Luke 6:20

^{xiv} Matthew 5:5.

^{xv} Matthew 25: 34-40.

^{xvi} Borg, *Heart of Christianity*, p. 140.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, pp. 142-145.

^{xviii} Joanne Sanders, "In God We Trust", a sermon preached in the Stanford Memorial Church on October 16, 2001. www.stanford.edu/group/religiouslife/cgi-bin/wordpress/media/past-sermons/

^{xix} Paul Krugman, "Panic of the Plutocrats," *The New York Times* (October 9, 2011).

^{xx} "The 'Occupy' movement includes religious groups", [Christian Century](#); 11/1/2011, Vol. 128 Issue 22, p. 16.

^{xxi} Mitchell Landsberg, "A revival, without much religion; Despite common ideals, the Occupy movement remains largely secular," *Los Angeles Times* (October 29, 2011) Part AA, Pg. 1.

^{xxii} *Ibid.*

^{xxiii} *Ibid.*

^{xxiv} Borg, *Heart of Christianity*, pp. 132-133.

^{xxv} *Ibid.*, p. 140.

^{xxvi} Luke 6:20.

^{xxvii} Matthew 5:5.

^{xxviii} *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), p. 54, translating Matthew 6: 10, 13.