

The Kingdom of God and the Disasters of the World

Sermon for the 3rd to Last Sunday of the Church Year

Sermon Text: Luke 17:20-30



Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed,"²¹ nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you."²² And He said to the disciples, "The days are coming when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it.²³ And they will say to you, 'Look, there!' or 'Look, here!' Do not go out or follow them."²⁴ For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in His day.²⁵ But first He must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.²⁶ Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man.²⁷ They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all.²⁸ Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot – they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building,²⁹ but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all –³⁰ so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed."

A well-known trick that dictators of all kinds have always used was to console people with heaven. For example, some have tried to oppress whole groups of people by using this simple narrative: "here on earth, you must suffer. But don't worry, it will be better in heaven." And this is how people were sent to war. Sometimes even children were sent into mine fields so that they would set off the mines for the soldiers. These children were sent into certain death but a key was hung around their necks with the words: "this key opens the door of heaven to you!" That is a horrible misuse of God's name. And unfortunately, this story continues to this day. Interestingly, this question already preoccupied Jesus' contemporaries. They also had to suffer a lot. Similarly, the Jewish people of that time were eagerly waiting for God to come all at once to punish the unrighteous and reward the righteous. One can even say that it was perhaps the favorite activity of the Pharisees to dream about how God would finally punish the evil people. And that's why they now also wanted to know from Jesus what He thought about it all. And Jesus' answer to this question is very interesting. Jesus knew very well that the hope of eternal life could be terribly abused. Jesus also recognized that the Pharisees had set themselves on God's judgment seat and had already passed judgment in advance on many who, in their opinion, deserved God's punishment. They also longingly searched for signs in the heavens and other phenomena to prove when this time would finally dawn when God would create clear conditions. Jesus draws a red line through all these accounts. Likewise, He draws a line through the estimation of all people today who want to calculate when the Last Day will be. No, you can't understand the kingdom of God like this! And so, He prophesied already then, that people would again and again proclaim: "Here is the kingdom of God! Or there is the kingdom of God!" But the people will be false prophets and Jesus strongly warns us: "Do not go out or follow them!" Instead, the kingdom of God will come unexpectedly – at the time and place it is least expected. That is, among you! With this teaching about the kingdom of God, Jesus completely reversed the fantasies of the false prophets. The people wanted to use the kingdom of God as an instrument of power. They wanted to use it to manipulate or convict other people. And Jesus says: the kingdom of God is in your midst! In other words, the kingdom of God is not aimed at others, but at me. I have counted myself with God! And I must ask the question, am I prepared for the kingdom of God? Is my life in accordance with the kingdom of God? Is Jesus within me? Jesus names even more examples and says: people will eat and drink, they will get married and conduct business. They will do everything like in the time of Noah. They will actually do everything as if God didn't exist and they will live as though they themselves are judges over life and death. They will enjoy God's wonderful creation but will ignore the Creator. They are blind to the signs God sends. Instead, they will run after every false prophet. And we can observe this exact thing even today. Is it interesting to anyone that Jesus is coming again? We are much too busy and can't deal with such things. Instead of following Jesus, we follow various other teachings. In YouTube, there are countless examples of people who predict the future. Some say when the electricity will fail. Others say when we will have no more food in the stores or when the atomic bomb will fall on our heads and much more. These people want to scare us for whatever reason. And

there are many people who therefore buy generators, who buy so-called nuclear attack-proof vests, etc.... Jesus says that we should be careful. Don't run after everyone. Instead, focus on the essential: ask about God and what it means to have God in your life. That doesn't mean that we may no longer do all the things that Jesus lists like buying, selling, getting married, etc. No, we're all supposed to do them like everyone else. But we ask ourselves the question, how can I do these things in God's name and according to His Will. Here, the question about my neighbor is especially important. The people that God sends my way are not there for me to despise, manipulate, or judge. No! God has placed them in my path as a responsibility. I should ask myself how I can share God's love with these people. But Jesus goes a step further and explains the kingdom of God in a completely different way than all other explanations. Because Jesus doesn't just say that the kingdom of God is coming sometime in the future. No, the kingdom of God is already in the midst of you! Jesus tells us that we have to reckon with God in the here and now. According to Jesus' teaching, the kingdom of God is not a time that lies in the distant future. The kingdom of God is also not a nation that judges the wicked... and it is above all not a regime. The kingdom of God is not a series of commands that we should fulfill so that we can prove that we belong to the good side either. No to all of these! Jesus Himself is the kingdom of God. Wherever Jesus is, there the kingdom of God is! But how is Jesus there? Jesus said to His disciples: "I am with you always, to the end of the age!" and then He linked His presence with Baptism: "Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit!" Therefore, the kingdom of God is not a time or a human law, but it is a state of being that Paul later describes with the words, "In Christ." Through Baptism, we are in Christ. And when Jesus speaks with the Pharisee Nicodemus and says to him: "you must be born again through water and the Spirit!" He means exactly that. Born again in our time. Born again in the here and now! And that means that this connection with Jesus shapes our entire life from now on. We have the characteristics of Jesus in our bodies. Jesus is a part of us. And because Jesus is, at the same time, in heaven and on earth, we are, on the one hand, completely on this earth and on the other, completely in heaven. That fills us with great joy and peace. Even when everything is in chaos. Especially when we pray the Lord's Prayer: "Your kingdom come!" In his explanation, Luther said: it means that with this prayer, we pray that God's kingdom will come to me today as well. Jesus has a unique vision of the kingdom of God that you don't get from anyone else. When we are baptized or celebrate the Lord's Supper, then we are connected with God and with heaven at the same time. And yet Jesus speaks of the fact that we nevertheless remain here on earth and are exposed to all challenges. The completion is not yet now, even though we are already baptized now. There is a part of the kingdom of God that we now experience and a part that we will first experience afterwards. Even though we are baptized completely into Christ, we still become sick and at some point, we die. We also see that our world is still in chaos – there are countless wars and sometimes we also suffer from the sin that still clings to us and to our being. Even we as the Church are not triumphant over all the evil in the world. Instead, we carry the traits of the Cross. To the world, we appear in all lowliness and humility. Jesus expects us to live like this in this age. We will not then see proof of why we are Christians or what the point is. We will live in faith and not by sight.

The Persian poet Hafez wonderfully expresses this seeing by faith in his Divan Ghazal 1. In this poem that talks about love, he speaks about the secrets of God that are hard to observe. Take the first verse, for example. In this verse, he explains that he senses the message of heaven in the cool wind. This message is a secret that is hard to decipher. And then, he talks about how he took a break at an oasis during a long journey with his camel. At this point, it is necessary to know that travel groups of that time always included a lot of camels in a caravan. Well, when the foremost camel began to get ready to go, the last camel in the line heard the bells in front of him and therefore understood the sign. Now get ready! Pack your things! You're on your way. And don't miss the entire caravan because you've made yourself too at home. The meaning of Hafez here is that we have our house here on earth. But the house is only temporary... here on this earth, we eat, we drink, we get married... but our home is only temporary. We are on a journey! We don't remain here forever! Don't you hear the bells of the camel? They remind you that you're on a journey. Your destination is not here. You are on your way to God.

Jesus' interpretation of the kingdom of God shows us that God is not just a thought, not just an assumption, but a reality that begins now with our Baptism. And all the things that we do, like worship, prayers, praising God, and many more things, are the bells of the heavenly messenger that reminds us of the future in Jesus. Amen.