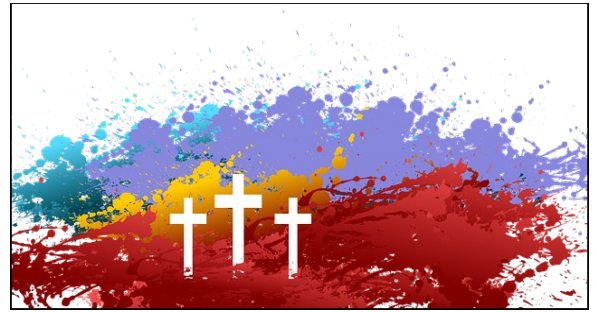


Lent 2022 – the Characteristics of God’s Reign:

Offered to you by the Spiritual Life Committee



Introduction:

During this Lent, we will be focusing on aspects of the Reign of God, as the author of the Gospel of Luke has his Jesus describe it. The “Kingdom of God,” or Reign of God, or “kindom of God,” all refer, as the biblical historian John Dominic Crossan likes to say, to what human communities would look like if God were King – or President or Prime Minister, or leader – and not our corporate and political leaders.

The creators of the Common Lectionary have chosen Gospel texts for each Sunday that point to some aspect of this new way of being community. Our task, this Lent, will be to try to make these characteristics live in our lives today, in our current circumstances.

In the Gospel for the First Sunday of Lent, we will relive with Luke’s Jesus how he decides against the traditional ways of pushing social change. From that, we might learn to rethink our own strategies for bringing about change.

In the Gospel for the Second Sunday of Lent, we will become aware that the dominant culture – in this case symbolized by Jerusalem, symbol of affluence – will never be happy with Jesus’ program. We will be invited to be aware of the ways in which our society will push back on our desire to create more compassionate and just communities.

In the Gospel for the Third Sunday, we will learn that the first step toward this new form of community is to assume responsibility for our actions.

In the Gospel for the Fourth Sunday, we will find out that to live in God’s Reign, we discover that it works differently from the dominant culture: it’s not based on reward for accomplishments, but we are all given what we need. We will be invited to be sensitive to the times when we find ourselves living by the rules of the dominant culture rather than by the economy of God.

Finally, in the Gospel for the Fifth Sunday, we are reminded again that the logic of God’s Reign is different from the logic of the dominant culture. We will be asked to explore ways we can be as extravagant in our love as Mary.

Here are some ways you could use these meditations during Lent. Perhaps you might read the text for the following Sunday at the beginning of the week and then spend some time reflecting on the questions at the end of each section. Or you could take half an hour each day and re-read the scripture for the coming Sunday, and spend some time in meditation with it. In any case, you are advised to keep a journal noting your reflections and experiences with the material. Above all, you might consider sharing your reactions and listening to the reactions of others on the Sunday morning Holy Listening Circle.

In the Gospel for the First Sunday of Lent, we will relive with Luke's Jesus how he decides against the traditional ways of pushing social change. From that, we might learn to rethink our own strategies for bringing about change.



Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him.

As we enter the time of Lent, we typically reflect on the Temptations of Jesus. We know this has to be made up; no one was there, and it is unlikely that Jesus would have shared his travails in this manner ("You'll never guess what happened to me up there in the wilderness...") Moreover, the story seems to suggest that the temptations occur only on the last day, when it is far more likely that Jesus truly wrestled with what he thought he might be called to be and to do over the entire time he was in the wilderness. (Forty days is a "magic" number, and it so happens to be the same as the "40 years" the Hebrews were in the desert.)

The story is designed as a set-piece. It almost seems like it's built around a series of proof-texts, the way fundamentalists today use the Bible to justify their positions. "Do this because it says..." - "No I won't because it says elsewhere..."

The root story is so rich that it can be interpreted any number of ways. The approach I personally prefer rests on my understanding of the contrast between the values of the dominant culture and those of the Kingdom of God. Thus, I see the three temptations as the basic options our Ego – and the dominant militaristic/consumer culture - offers us for making change happen: buying people off with wealth (stones into bread), coercing people with political or military power (the kingdoms) and winning people over with status (jumping off and being saved).

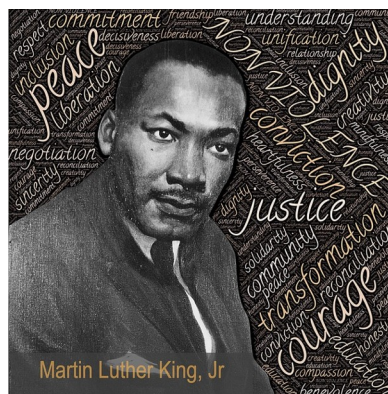
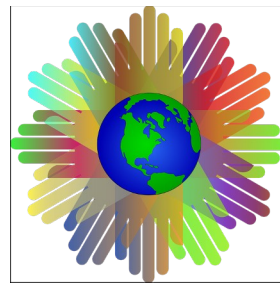
From the biblical point of view the opposite of wealth (i.e. accumulation) is not poverty but redistribution. In the same way, the opposite of power (i.e. dominating force) is not powerlessness but

mutuality (i.e. shared power). To take these thoughts to completion, the opposite of status or privilege is equity. Hence the key characteristics of the Kingdom of God include redistribution, mutuality and equity.

What Jesus seems to reject are all the standard forms of exercising coercive power which the secular world uses. If, indeed, Luke's Jesus is trying to live out Sabbath economics values and the commandments of the Jubilee vision, he needs to live out an alternative way of being human which does not rely on coercive "power over" but collaborative "power to."

Lastly, we cannot help but see the foundation of Sabbath economics in the temptation narrative. What do we need? (Daily bread) How shall we live? (Don't accumulate; instead redistribute) Whom and how shall we worship? (Not ourselves, but God. By honouring Sabbath, which means practising rest, jubilee (debt forgiveness) and shalom).

How much of our lives remain caught up in dominant culture values of wealth, power and status? How much of our lives are based on redistribution, mutuality and equity? What actions might we take to bring about social change through redistribution, mutuality and equity?



Lent 2 Luke 13:31-35 Lament over Jerusalem

In the Gospel for the Second Sunday of Lent, we become aware that the dominant culture – in this case symbolized by Jerusalem, symbol of affluence - will not be happy with Jesus' program. We are invited to be aware of the ways in which our society will push back on our desire to create more compassionate and just communities.



At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’ Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Here is yet another reading where Jesus is commenting on the values of the dominant culture. Of course, it's a Lenten theme – Lent being a time when we intentionally look with sadness and remorse upon our life in the dominant culture, and “repent.”

The dominant culture always silences its critics. Just look at examples in our current culture: not too long ago, a Conservative government ordered the tax investigation of not-for-profits who spend “too much money” on political activism (i.e., critiquing the government); even the United Church was on that list... Or in the US, see how Fox News manages to put negative spin on any form of criticism of the dominant neo-capitalist ideology. Notice how the former President lashes out and punishes everyone from his party who dares to disagree with him. These are some of the ways the dominant culture creates to kill the prophets who bring a message of rebuke. We won't even mention what dictatorships do to people who disagree with them. From Dom Helder Camara, these words: “*When I feed the poor, I am called a saint; when I ask why the poor have no food, I am called a communist.*”



Note that, as time goes by, Luke has Jesus focus his attention more and more on Jerusalem. His ministry had typically been in Galilee, where the poor, the disenfranchised and the economically disadvantaged readily heard his message. This is not going to be the case in Jerusalem, the seat of secular as well as institutional religious power, and the home of the rich who, in fact, are part and parcel of the problem of the economically disenfranchised. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. They will certainly not be enamoured with Jesus' message of an alternative lifestyle based on different values.

Jesus notes that an alternative culture, based on Jubilee values of mutuality, redistribution and equity, heals and attends to the marginalized. Let's remember the United Church's recent Mission Statement: "Deep spirituality, bold discipleship, daring justice, and courageous communities." Can you give examples where the dominant culture has indeed silenced your voice as you spoke out for change? To what extent are we, as individuals, as a church community, ready and willing to take a stand against a value of the dominant culture? In what ways can Harcourt be a "courageous community" which "dares justice" in these troubled times?



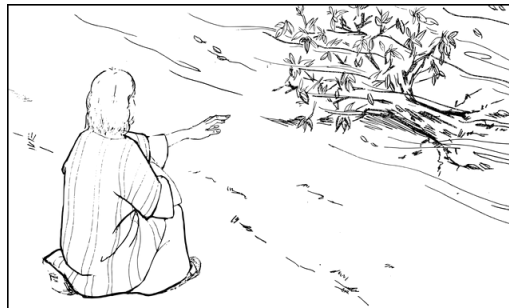
On this Third Sunday, we will learn that the first step toward this new form of community is to assume responsibility for our actions. I confess, though: this is not a transparent Gospel message. Let's hear it and see if we can make some sense of it. (Spoiler alert: I'm going to propose that we translate this as "See things with a higher mind or you'll be lost.")



At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"



This is another text in which Jesus warns of a culling unless civilizations mend their ways. Perhaps John the Baptizer was not so wrong after all, at least in Luke's telling: this sounds a lot like clearing the threshing floor. The message is "repent or perish." Now "repent" is the traditional translation of "metanoia," which really means "a higher mind." So, the expression could mean "rethink this at a higher plane or you're lost." The message remains garbled, though: the author of Luke has Jesus point to victims of accidents and cruelty and notes that they were not any more guilty than those he is speaking to, implying that such calamities are not God's punishment for breaking covenant. Contemporary theology would agree! But then twice he admonishes his hearers to repent or the same thing will happen to them.

Biblical historian John Dominic Crossan suggests that we should probably read the Bible as a dialectic between an inspired understanding of a God of unconditional love on the one hand, and a human, "common sense" response of a God of conditional love, judgment and punishment, on the other. Can we safely apply Crossan's criteria here and suggest that the "repent or perish" message is the human predilection

for a punishing God over Jesus' revolutionary message of a God of infinite love? Might we suggest, then, that this passage is some form of human commentary on events happening around the Lukan community? Could it be that the Lukan community was aware that devastation – in the form of the chaos following the destruction of the temple - was upon them, and they were concluding that this was God's handiwork?

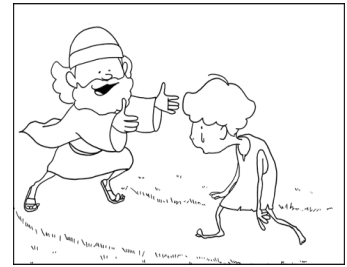
The parable of the barren fig tree seems to have lost its punch line: by rights, in keeping with the tone of the previous trope, it should be cut down, right? Were later redactors uncomfortable with the decisively punitive tone of this story and softened it? Through the watering down it certainly has lost its point.

What's our "take-away" from this ambiguous Gospel message? Certainly not the fire-and-brimstone lesson that unless we behave we perish. Perhaps we might take a lesson from our Buddhist brothers and sisters and think of the concept of "karma." This concept reminds us that all our actions have consequences. All. And the consequences will inevitably visit us for better or for worse. The world is not a "moral" place where good actions are rewarded and bad actions are punished by a judging God. The world is a neutral place where all actions have consequences – good or bad. Catastrophe and rain fall on the good and bad alike. Merit and meritocracies go down to defeat here. Works righteousness and reward/punishment models go out the window. The questions are simple and the answers blunt. When is the moment for change and doing better? Now. When is the moment to forgive? Now. When is the power of grace operational? Now. When is the world of grace accessible? Now. What are we waiting for? This "higher" point of view might be what is referred to by the term "metanoia."

The call to repent – "metanoia," literally "a higher mind" in Greek - might include a simple call to see things from a higher plane – from God's point of view, for example; to be responsible for our actions; to work out in advance what the consequences might be and to decide appropriately. Just being attentive to the consequences of our actions would improve the world immensely. Perhaps helping young ones become aware of consequences - "karma" - might be one mighty step towards adulthood!

To what extent does your theology still believe that God punishes the unjust and rewards to just? How do you make sense of the multiple perpetrators of evil who go unpunished? What would happen if we took seriously the notion that all our actions – good and bad – have consequences which reverberate down through time? How might we keep our political and social leaders accountable for their actions?





On this Fourth Sunday, we discover that the Reign of God works differently from the dominant culture: it's not based on reward for accomplishments, instead we are all given what we need. We will be invited to be sensitive to the times when we find ourselves living by the rules of the dominant culture rather than by the economy of God.

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable:

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

How can we hear this famous parable with fresh ears? There really are two stories here – the prodigal son and the resentful son. It might help to see the story freshly if we remember the context of parables: they were oral stories, and they might have been drawn out over hours, depending on the occasion, and they would certainly have varied with each telling. The Gospels present an ossified version of each parable.

It would also help to understand the social context behind this parable. Once we grasp that, we will see how utterly outrageous the story is. The context is a fiercely patriarchal society: the father is owner and master of everything, including slaves, wives, and children. It would be utterly unheard of for the younger son to demand his share of the father's fortune. The son who even dared to make such a request would be shamed or banished. The father who gave in would be the laughing stock of the community.

It would also be unheard of for the father to forgive so readily, after the affront of his ungrateful son who would have brought shame and disgrace to the father in the community.

So, from the perspective of a patriarchal society, this parable would have held up the unlikely, improbable, and incomprehensible extent of God's love. The implication is that we can foolishly engage in massively reprehensible behaviour and God would take us back in a heartbeat. How distant is this from our traditional understanding of a judging, punishing accountant in the sky who keeps track of our least misdemeanour?

The second story is very different from the first, and speaks about the resentment of the faithful at such divine largesse. Behind the surly resentment of the older brother, we can almost hear the “tut-tutting” of the pillars of the community at the behaviour of the father... We who have been loyal and constant and hardworking expect a certain “fairness” from our God. We don't “get” this kind of unwarranted forgiveness. We still live in a meritocracy – both in the dominant culture and within the church - where the deserving get rewarded, and the undeserving get punished. There is clearly a sense of the unfairness of such forgiveness.

Which character in the parable best describes our church? How much of secular society's rules and values have permeated the Church? How prepared are we as a church community to go against society's norms? How ready would we be to open our doors and our hearts to someone from the “dregs of society” who seeks a home in our congregation?



Finally, on this Fifth Sunday, we are reminded again that the logic of God's Reign is different from the logic of the dominant culture. We will be asked to explore ways we can be as extravagant in our love as Mary.



Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

There is something profoundly erotic and outrageous about this story. This is not how the dominant culture would act. Aside from issues of cultural norms and appropriate behaviour, the dominant culture would look for the transactional value of the gesture: what would have been in it for Mary? The answer here: nothing.

Nothing??? That's exactly what Judas said. Judas is us, insofar as we are members of the dominant culture. Of course, John's demonizing of Judas should be discounted – there is absolutely no evidence that he was a thief. But Judas plays a key role here: he becomes the symbol of someone who is unable to leave his darkness to see the light, unable to "repent," or better, to see with a higher mind, as we learned last week; he stands for those in his day – and in ours – who are blind to God's outrageous love; who hang on to "common sense" values; who cannot see that God through Jesus is doing a new thing. You see, from the point of view of the dominant culture, everything is wrong about this picture! First, she is touching a man in public; then she is wasting a rare perfume; and she is drying his feet with her hair! It is impossible for "common sense" people to see the sacramental value of pouring valuable perfume on Jesus' feet.

The Spirit moves us to perform any number of strange acts of kindness and creativity that make little or no sense to the "common sense," transactional world of the dominant culture. Even the whole "Random Acts of Kindness" movement makes no sense to those who are locked in to "fairness" and propriety, and profit-and-loss calculations. Judas here operates out of the same mindset as the older brother in last Sunday's story. Generous extravagance is not part of the dominant culture's values. It is at the heart of Jesus' message and it is the core of God's abundance.

So, when is the time to show grace? Now. When is the time for extravagant love? Now. When is the occasion for Kingdom living? NOW!

And we are, of course, in this story, foreshadowing the wrapping of Jesus' body in spices after his brutal crucifixion...

Can you remember any “random acts of kindness” you might have performed? Have you ever created something out of sheer joy and exuberance? Have you ever experienced yourself inhibited in performing an act of kindness, out of some sort of “common sense” objection?



Conclusion:

This brings this series on the Gospels of Lent for Year “C” to an end... I maintain that these five Gospels describe quite clearly what Jesus saw as some characteristics of human communities living under the reign of God. Let’s try to recap:

1. From the “Temptation story”, living under the reign of God means living with the values of wealth redistribution, shared power, and equity for everyone, rather than wealth, power and status.
2. From the “story of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem”, living under the reign of God means being courageous communities in the face of the dominant culture’s determination to silence its critics.
3. From the “repent or perish story”, living under the reign of God means seeing things from a higher perspective and living out of the extravagance of that perspective.
4. From the “lost sons story”, living under the reign of God means discarding the judgmental perspective of the meritocratic dominant culture and welcoming everyone simply because they are.
5. Finally, from the “story of Mary pouring of exotic perfume”, living under the reign of God means abandoning any transactional approach to our actions and learning to act out of self-giving love.

We hope this series on the Gospels of Lent has provided you with ample material for reflection and prayer.

Thank you.

Harcourt’s Spiritual Life Committee