

## With Us and Among Us

Luke 17:20-21

“The kingdom of God is among you.” Luke 17:21

The hospital bed was set up in the guest room on the second floor, so now he no longer had to face that third flight of stairs up to the master suit. But he still had steps to struggle down to get to the doorway and then even more to make it on down to the driveway and the car. (That’s the other and hidden cost you must pay for a home with a view.) After three or four stairs, panting, sweating, pale from the pain, Allen had to stop and catch his breath and muster up the strength to try another one or two. It seemed impossible to me every time we did it - his wife Charline behind, clasping his belt, me in front monitoring every faltering, stumbling step, hoping to anticipate and absorb and cushion a little of the fall when it came. And then when we got back home, we had it all to do again, only in reverse, up instead of down. One week he had treatments or doctor’s appointments every day, Monday through Friday. We had to do it five days in a row. Allen Sacks is the bravest, most courageous, most determined man I’ve ever known. I wouldn’t have been able to do, would’ve just given up.

A few days before that week-long ordeal, Adam had asked me if I would preach for him this morning. We talked a little about revelation, the theme of his sermons in February, and the passage he had planned to preach on today - Jesus’ words in the 21<sup>st</sup> verse of Luke 17: “The kingdom of God is in the midst of you.” I started thinking about that verse, especially in relationship to the theme of revelation, and then I also looked up the lectionary passages for today just in case one of them might also have something to say about revelation. The first reading, the lesson from the Hebrew scriptures, was Isaiah 40: 21-31. I came to those beloved soaring verses with which this passage draws to an end: *He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Oh my God! Those words took my breath away. He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary and young men will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint* – not stumble, not fall. At that particular moment in my life this stirring passage that I have loved almost forever, that I have studied many times and taught and preached on, and almost memorized without even trying – at that moment when these words leaped right off the page and knocked me down, it was Allen Sacks I heard them speaking about, Allen and Charline and me. In that moment once again God spoke to me, clearly unmistakably. These words were God’s words, God’s word to me – revealed right there in the scripture: *He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.... those who wait for the Lord ... shall walk and not faint.* Thank you, Lord. Thank you. You see, in that moment this passage to me was not **about** revelation. It **was** itself the revelation: God’s promise, God’s promise **to me** and to Allen and Charline. In the morning we would be able to make it back down all those stairs one more time. God had promised. We **would walk and not faint.** Thanks be to God!

The text that Adam suggested we reflect on this morning is Jesus' answer to some Pharisees who asked him when the kingdom of God was coming: *The kingdom of God*, Jesus replied, *is not coming with things that can be seen; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.*"

When is it coming, Lord, this kingdom of yours, the kingdom of God? When will we see it, Lord, - the lamb lie down with the lion and toddlers playing with rattlesnakes? When will we see it - the eyes of the blind opened and lame dancing for joy? When will the thrones of the powerful be overthrown and the meek inherit the earth? When will every tear be wiped from our eyes and death and mourning and crying and pain be no more? When will the hungry be fed and the naked clothed and the prisoners set free? When will all the walls be torn down and the fugitive, the immigrant, the refugee welcomed into our beloved home, America. When, Lord? When is it coming, this kingdom of yours? when all our children will be able to see a doctor when they are sick - when another new well will be dug in Wachara and all the thirsty drink cups of cool, clear, clean water given in the name of Jesus?

It's not just the Pharisees. We all ask, "When, Lord?" And Jesus replies to us just as he did to them that we're asking the wrong question. "When" is already here; has already come. "The kingdom of God is in the midst of you?" It's here. Right here. You live in it, in the midst of it. But it's not obvious to us, is it? Not obvious to the Pharisees, and not obvious to you and me. I think that is what Jesus means when he says it is not something to be observed, something we can see.

Here we are, right slap dab in the middle of it, but we can't see it, it's not obvious. We have to have someone, or something, show us, point it out to us, explain to us what is really happening, show us what is really real. And that is revelation - what revelation is and does. I look at Allen trying to get down those steps again and all I can see is the agony and the pain, and believe me, they are no illusion. They are very real. And that's all I can see. But then someone or something opens up to me the book of Isaiah the prophet and in his words - in those inspired words of this human, mortal man - I hear the great Lord God Almighty speak directly to me and to my exact and present situation: "Charles, those who wait for the Lord - those who cast their lives into the hands of the living God - shall renew their strength. Somehow they will be able to get down all those stairs one more time, without fainting, without falling. You can't see it. But don't you know that I am here with you, in the very midst of the three of you? That's revelation - when "they" becomes "you" - when "they" becomes "me" - when all the promises of the living God becomes God's promises not to someone else back then, but God's promises to **me** - and to **you**. When they become alive and real once again for us and in us - living and real in our present moment, in our own time and place, in our own lives.

Outside the Bible, one of my favorite passage about revelation - about God revealing himself to us - is that beautifully written, profound and beloved paragraph with which Albert Schweitzer sums up and ends The Quest for the Historical Jesus. When Jesus called his first

disciples to leave their nets and follow him, they didn't really know who he was or where he was leading them. It is only in their obeying and following him – watching him, listening to him, learning from him, experiencing his forgiveness and his love – it is only in their day by day living with Jesus – that they come to know who he really is. Isn't that how it always is with us human beings? It is only by living together that we come to know who someone else is, really and truly is. Only by living with and among each other is the truth known, finally revealed. And so it is with Jesus also.

*He comes to us as one unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word, "Follow me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill in our own time. He commands, and to those who obey him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the trials, the conflicts, the suffering which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.*

Revelation is far too important a thing to leave to the theologians – or even to us preachers. The Lord **is** with us and among us. It must be in our own experience - in our lives together with him and with one another - that we learn Who He really is.