

OPENING HYMN

"Jesus Shall Reign" (ELW 434)

OPENING PRAYER

Gathered into one by the Holy Spirit, let us pray as Jesus taught us: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen. (ELW, p. 112)

FOCUS VERSES

(Matthew 3:7-12, Galatians 5:16-23, Acts 10:3-42)

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)

The kingdom of God: Beautiful feet

Session one

Announcing the reign of God

BY MARK ALLAN POWELL

INTRODUCTION

Let's begin with a Bible trivia question: What does Jesus talk about more than anything else? Try asking your friends (religious, spiritual, both or neither) and see what answers you get. Some (I hope) might say "love." Others (I fear) might say "sin." Once, I asked random patrons at a bar in Seattle and someone guessed, "Carpentry?" He might have been joking.

The statistical answer to this question is "the kingdom of God." There are 52 references to the kingdom in Matthew, 18 in Mark, and 41 in Luke—only two references in John, but we'll discuss why in this session. Jesus has a great deal to say about the kingdom of God: where it is found, when it will come, how it draws near, to whom it belongs.

Sometimes it seems Jesus can't talk about anything else without getting back to this, his favorite topic. He might start out talking about "love" or "sin"—or "prayer" or "money" or "marriage" or "children" or just about anything else—but before he is done, he makes some sort of reference to the kingdom of God. Once in a while the Gospel writers refer to the entire content of Jesus's teaching as "the good news of the kingdom" (see Matthew 4:23, 9:35 and 24:14; Luke 4:43, 8:1 and 16:16). It is good news! We will learn a lot about "the kingdom of God" (and related subjects) in the next four months. There may be some surprises. While this phrase probably means what you think it means, it might

also mean a whole lot more. (Hint: It doesn't just refer to a place where we hope to go when we die). Still, everything we learn in this four-session Bible study will serve to underscore one simple truth: What Jesus and others teach us about the kingdom of God is good news!

ACTIVITY: COMPLETE THE VERSE

This is more of a "guessing game" than a memory test. With your group or individually, see if you can guess the missing word or words in each verse.

First, from the Gospels:

- a. John the Baptist said, " _____, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!" (Matthew 3:7).
- b. Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for _____ to enter the kingdom of God." (Matthew 19:24)
- c. Jesus was indignant and said to his disciples. "Let the _____ come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these the kingdom of God belongs." (Mark 10:14)
- d. Jesus tells his disciples, "There are some standing here who will not taste _____ until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power." (Mark 9:1)
- e. Jesus tells his disciples that before "the end" comes, "this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the _____." (Matthew 24:14)
- f. A thief on the cross said to Jesus, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus replied, "This day you will be with me in _____." (Luke 22:42-43).

Second, try to complete these bonus verses from the letters of Paul:

- g. For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but _____, _____, and _____ in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:7).
- h. Flesh and _____ cannot inherit the

kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable (1 Cor 15:50).

- i. (God) has rescued us from the power of _____ and transferred us into the kingdom of (God's) beloved Son (Col 1:13).
- j. The kingdom of God depends not on talk but on _____ (1 Cor 4:20).

KINGDOM OF GOD AND OTHER EXPRESSIONS

As we begin to explore the biblical concept of the kingdom of God, we discover almost immediately that this phenomenon goes by many names. The Old Testament often talks about "the promised land" or "Zion" or "the city of God"—expressions that can refer to literal, physical locations but (especially in poetry) can take on a symbolic or spiritual sense similar to the meaning of the phrase "kingdom of God" in the New Testament.

Interestingly, first-century (much like modern) Christians sometimes tried to find new language that would be meaningful to people who might be offended by traditional terms. We know, for instance, that some Jewish people tried not to speak the word "God" aloud. To show reverence for the divine name, they talked about "the Blessed One" or another description that would avoid saying "God." I suppose that was one way to make sure you did not take God's name in vain (and, in doing so, break one of the Ten Commandments). In any case, out of respect for these people's piety, the Gospel of Matthew usually presents Jesus as talking about "the kingdom of heaven" instead of "the kingdom of God." The meaning is the same. Everyone knew that "kingdom of heaven" was just another way of saying "kingdom of God," but it was a polite way of doing so if you wanted to respect those who did not speak the word "God" out loud.

In the Gospel of John, we find another anomaly. Apparently, for some people at that time, it wasn't the word "God" that was problematic, but the word "kingdom." Most likely, this was because the

word summoned images of the Roman empire and referred to God in the same way as a tyrant/emperor. Whatever the reason, in John's Gospel, Jesus often talks about "eternal life" (or "abundant life" or "life") instead of saying "the kingdom of God." Thus, instead of saying that those who believe in Jesus will enter the kingdom of God, the Gospel of John says that whoever believes in Jesus will have eternal life (John 3:16). The meaning is pretty much the same; only the language is different.

Share aloud or reflect:

Some Christians in our own day have said they do not find the language of "kingdom" to be helpful for a variety of reasons: it smacks of colonialism and imperialism and/or suggests that God is a male ruler (a "king") who dominates his subjects. One suggestion has been to substitute the term "kin-dom" in prayers and other forms of religious expression. So one would use the "kin-dom" of God instead of "the kingdom of God." This expresses the biblical idea that we are a family and implies that God is more like a parent than a monarch.

1. What do you think of this idea? What is gained or lost by using it?
2. Would you be willing to try using it in a few places in the worship service or your personal devotions? Why or why not?
3. Can you think of other ways to speak of the reality that we are all related to God?

REIGN OF GOD, RULE OF GOD

Almost all Bible scholars think that it would often be better for English Bibles to use the phrases "reign of God" or "rule of God" rather than "kingdom of God." Here's why: The Greek word that

gets translated "kingdom" in our Bibles is *basilea*, a word that it might be good for everyone to learn. Many people who have never studied Greek know that *agape* is the biblical word for "love." Likewise, *basilea* is not a hard word to learn; it is easy to pronounce and in some parts of the world it's used as a woman's name. (For example, Basilea Schlink, the founder of a Lutheran sisterhood in Germany, authored popular devotional books in the latter half of the twentieth century.)

In any case, the word *basilea* describes an action: the act of someone ruling or reigning over someone or something else. For some reason, the King James Bible translated this word as "kingdom"—an odd choice, since a kingdom is not an action. We may say "God reigns" or "God rules," but it makes no sense to say, "God kingdoms." Scholars have groused about this for 400 years, but church leaders and Bible translators have thought the "kingdom" language is so entrenched in our religious understanding that it is too late to change it now.

As a result, people who rely on English Bibles may get the impression that the "kingdom of God" Jesus speaks about is a location—a place where God lives with all the angels and where people get to live with God after they die. This is not completely wrong; sometimes, the Bible does talk about a place in heaven or in the future where God is completely in charge. We may call that place the "kingdom of God" if we like, but the term refers not to the location itself but to the reality of God ruling. While we may associate that reality with some otherworldly realm in heaven or in the future, Jesus insists that it can also be found on earth, in everyday lives, here and now.

When Jesus talks about the *basilea* of God he is referring to the phenomenon of God reigning or ruling. This is not something circumscribed by space or time. The so-called kingdom of God is found wherever and whenever God reigns.

This becomes more clear when we consider

individual verses in the Bible. Take, for example, the line from the Lord's Prayer: "Your kingdom come, your will be done" (Matthew 6:10). What exactly are we praying for when we ask for God's kingdom to come? Sometimes I wonder, what do people *think* they are praying for? If they think that God's kingdom is a place up in the sky where the angels live... then are we praying for that place to come down to earth? Are we praying for the world as we know it to come to an end?

No, that is not something Jesus thought we should ask for when we pray. Rather, Jesus wants us to pray for God to rule our lives. When we ask for God's *basilea* to come, we are asking that the reign of God might come to us—to our world or nation or church or family. We want to be included among those whom God rules.

Indeed, many commentators have noted that Jesus frequently spoke in a poetic manner, saying the same thing twice, using different words (e.g., "ask and it will be given you, search and you will find," Matthew 7:7). So here, "your kingdom come" and "your will be done" are parallel phrases, essentially meaning the same thing. God's kingdom (or reign) comes *when* God's will is done, for God can only truly be said to rule when what God wants to happen takes place.

Share aloud or reflect:

Based on what we've discussed so far, what do you think these biblical passages mean?

4. "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32).
5. "Strive for the kingdom of God and (God's) righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33)

6. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3).
7. "Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you'" (Luke 17:20-21).

HERE AND THERE, ALREADY AND NOT YET

When we realize that the kingdom of God is not a place, but an activity—a phenomenon that occurs whenever and wherever God is in charge—this makes a difference. In 35 years of teaching at a seminary, I had numerous students and pastors tell me that this simple insight opened the door to understanding many biblical passages. We will look at a few passages in session one—and more in the next three months—but first let's further consider how the kingdom of God can be either a present or future reality.

Sometimes when Jesus or others talk about the kingdom of God, they are obviously referring to a future context when God will rule over all things, including people who have been raised to a life beyond death. At other times, they are discussing a present-day context in which God's rule is less complete—evident in the lives of the faithful who trust God, but exercised in a faithless world where God's gracious plans for creation sometimes go unfulfilled. Theologians say the kingdom of God is both "already" and "not yet": God is *already* ruling in ways that make life significantly better than it would be otherwise, but God is *not yet* ruling our world in a manner that makes it Paradise (Luke 22:43).

Here are two examples of the future sense:

- Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew, "many will come from east and west and will eat with

Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 8:11).

- Jesus tells his disciples at the Last Supper, “I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God” (Mark 14:25).

In these verses, the phrase “in the kingdom of God (or heaven)” means “in the future, when God rules over all.” When that comes to pass, everything will be as God wishes: death will be no more and followers of Jesus will be able to sit down for a meal with heroes of the Bible, or even enjoy a glass of wine with Jesus himself.

Here is an example of the present sense:

- After Jesus performs an exorcism, he says, “If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you” (Matthew 12:28).

The healings and exorcisms Jesus performs are signs of what happens when God’s rule is effective and God’s will is done. Now, in the present time, that is not always the case. God is not yet ruling creation in a way that is complete or total—many diseases are not healed; many demons are not banished. But sometimes God’s rule is accomplished right here, right now— and then there is healing and liberation.

Another example:

- When a scribe agrees with Jesus that loving God and neighbor is more important than offering sacrifices, Jesus tells him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:34).

This scribe is not a disciple or follower of Jesus, but he is on the right track. Once you get what Jesus says about loving God and neighbor, you are very close to having a life ruled by God, right here, right now.

We could keep looking at passages (and we will

in a moment) but let’s not get the idea that every “kingdom of God” text can be easily classified as speaking of the present or the future, of the *already* or of the *not yet*. Many could speak to either—or both. Sometimes they speak in one way to some people and in another way to others. Some texts may be puzzling: Is this how God rules our lives now? Or how God will rule our lives in the future? It may be impossible to tell, until something happens to bring the meaning home.

Share aloud or reflect:

8. Look back at the ten Bible verses listed at the beginning of our study (the ones from the “complete the verse” activity). In light of what we’ve discussed, do you think that what is said in each of these verses refers primarily to the ultimate rule of God to be manifest in some glorious future (life after death)? Or does it refer primarily to the potential for God to rule human lives here and now? Or could it refer to either—or both?

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING JESUS EVER SAID

I think that Jesus must have had beautiful feet. This curious comment has nothing to do with the fact that more than one person wanted to wash his feet (one with their tears) and dry his feet with their hair (Luke 7:38; John 12:3). I mean it in a poetic sense, based on the book of Isaiah:

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” (Isaiah 52:7).

That’s what Jesus did! He announced peace (John 14:27; 16:33), and he brought good news, specifically the good news that our God reigns! Sometimes he even brought good news on mountains (Matthew 5:1; 28:16).

The Gospel of Mark tells us that after Jesus was baptized, before he called any disciples, he “came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying...”

Pause: Let’s stop for a moment and consider what he was saying. When he was “proclaiming the good news of God”—that is, proclaiming the gospel—what was he saying? Whatever comes next—the words that are in quotation marks after the word *saying* are definitive of what Jesus considered to be the gospel.

Today, when we say that somebody preaches the gospel, we might mean any number of things: they might be reminding us of God’s love and mercy... telling us how Jesus died for our sins... assuring us that God is with us in our troubles . . . but only once does the Bible say Jesus preached the gospel and then tell us word-for-word what he said.

Here it is: “The kingdom of God has come near!”

This may be the most important thing Jesus ever said, so we must make sure we understand it. He didn’t mean that some place up in the sky was unusually close to earth. He didn’t mean that the end of the ages was at hand. He meant that the possibility of God ruling our lives was greater than ever before—greater than we might ever imagine!

■ **Read:** Mark 1:14-15

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.”

To paraphrase Jesus’ words: “It’s happening! God is ready and willing to rule your lives! Believe it—and act accordingly!”

Jesus calls this good news—*definitive* of “good news.” It is what Jesus himself considered to be “the gospel.” But we might want to ask ourselves: Do we hear this (God being in charge) as good news? Do

we really want God to rule our lives? Or do we kind of like being in charge ourselves? As a way to consider these questions, try focusing on one specific aspect of your life: your time, your finances, your relationships.

Share aloud or reflect:

9. What if God were in charge of how I spend my time? Would I be busier or less busy than I am now? Or would I just use my time differently?
10. What if God were in charge of how I earn, manage and use money? Would I have more money than I have now? Less? Or would I just spend some of it differently?
11. What if God were in charge of my personal life?
12. What if God were in charge of how our *church* ...our *community* ...our *nation* uses its time, money and other gifts?

CLOSING PRAYER

God, we hear the word of Jesus and know that you are willing to rule our lives. We do not always know what that means. We are sometimes slow to trust you. We thank you for your grace, your patience, your persistence and your loving desire to make our lives more meaningful and joyful than they could ever be without you. Help us each day to pray, “your kingdom come, your will be done” for us, in us and through us. Amen. 🌿

The kingdom of God: Beautiful feet

Session one

Announcing the reign of God

BY MARK ALLAN POWELL

Below are key concepts (“take-aways”) and background material to help guide your group’s discussions.

INTRODUCTION

Key take-away: Jesus frequently talks about what English-language Bibles commonly call “the kingdom of God.” What he says about this phenomenon is termed “good news.”

Purpose: To explore examples of the widely-used phrase “kingdom of God (or heaven).” Here are the (upside-down) missing words from the verses:

a. repent; b. someone who is rich; c. little children;
d. death; e. world; f. paradise; g. righteousness;
peace, joy; h. blood; i. darkness; j. power.

KINGDOM OF GOD AND OTHER EXPRESSIONS

Key take-away: “Kingdom of heaven” (in Matthew) and “eternal life” (in John) are alternative expressions for the “kingdom of God.” These exemplified an effort by the early church to adapt religious language in ways that were sensitive to cultural concerns..

Purpose: To invite participants to discuss ways that some contemporary churches attempt to do what churches did in the New Testament period (adapt language to be culturally sensitive).

REIGN OF GOD, RULE OF GOD

Key take-away: The phrase “kingdom of God” (and related expressions) in our English-language Bibles does not refer to a location but to an activity: the phenomenon of God ruling or reigning, whenever and wherever that may be.

Purpose: To prompt participants to consider (or re-consider) the meaning of biblical passages when the “kingdom of God” is understood as an activity rather than (primarily) as a location. In Matthew 6:33 (“Seek first the kingdom of God...”), Jesus probably does not mean that our first priority in life is to make certain we will go to heaven when we die. Rather, our first priority is to live a life ruled by God (living, with God’s help, the way God wants). Everything else will fall into place.

WHAT CHURCH LEADERS LEARN AT SEMINARY ABOUT THE “KINGDOM OF GOD”

In terms of content, the most prominent topic addressed by Jesus in the New Testament is the imminence and certainty of God’s rule. Jesus often uses “kingdom of God” (or “kingdom of heaven”) to describe the sphere of God’s influence and power, a phenomenon that cannot be restricted by time and space. According to Jesus, the “kingdom of God” (a phrase that can also be translated “rule of God” or “reign of God”) is not just in heaven or in the future but is a reality to be experienced here and now. When Jesus says, “The kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15), he means something like, “God is ready and willing to rule our lives—right here, right now.” But that is not all there is to it; the kingdom also has a future dimension, and the New Testament presents Jesus as speaking of this as well.

There will be a final judgment at which Jesus himself will preside and human beings will either be granted access to eternal bliss or condemned to everlasting punishment, depending on their status relative to God and to Jesus himself. Jesus indicates that the blessings of the future kingdom are for those who believe in him and who are faithful to him in word and deed.

— Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament* (Baker Academic, 2018), p. 81.

For example, what [might] God's will be for me with regard to finances? It's not easy to tell, because *sometimes* God gives people in the Bible much more, yet at *other times* God tells people to give all their money away. So, before putting God in charge of my money, I would like a **preview**: Which way is it going to go in my case? Unfortunately, there is no preview—but we do get a **promise**: whether we have plenty or only a little, we will be content with what we have (Philippians 4:11-13) and enjoy the best possible life we can have in this world. (Source: Mark Allan Powell, *ELCA Stewardship Notes*, 2021).

HERE AND THERE, ALREADY AND NOT YET

Key take-away: Since the expression “kingdom of God (or heaven)” refers to an activity rather than to a location, its meaning is not limited by time. Sometimes it refers to God's ultimate future reign, but much of the time it refers to God's rule becoming evident in our lives, here and now. (See sidebar, “What church leaders learn...”)

Purpose: To consider whether biblical passages refer to the present or to the future or to both. Since the rule or reign of God cannot be limited by time or space, it is possible that key biblical texts may mean something different (referring to either present or future) depending on the person or the circumstances.

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING JESUS EVER SAID

Key take-away: Central to Jesus's message is the good news that God is ready and willing to rule our lives! This invitation becomes a challenge because putting God in charge means surrendering control.

Purpose: To help participants to envision what a life ruled by God might mean, and to consider this question: Do we trust God enough to believe that a life ruled by God will be a better life than one in which we are in charge?

FOR SHORTER MEETING TIMES

This Bible study is designed to take 90 minutes. However, groups that enjoy longer discussions may find the study takes two hours. Here's how to adapt the study to fit an even shorter time slot:

30-minute study

1. Read the “Introduction,” then take about 7 minutes to survey and briefly discuss the 10 Bible verses under “Share aloud or reflect #1.”
2. Read “Kingdom parables.” Ask if there are any questions regarding that material.
3. Conclude with “Share aloud or reflect #2.”
4. Ask participants to read the final two sections (“Kingdom meals” and “God's favorites”) at home. As leader, offer your group a few “teaser” comments about this material to encourage participants to follow through with reading these sections on their own.

45-minute or 60-minute study

Follow the 30-minute format, but: 1) Add one additional section—“Kingdom meals” or “God's favorites,” along with either a brief or longer consideration of that section's discussion/reflection questions. 2) Ask participants to read the remaining section at home. 🌿