

# Signs of God's Presence Near to Us

By: Stephanie Doeschot

January 26, 2020. On Pastor Stephanie's last Sunday with us, she preaches on Jesus' own mission statement from Luke 4. We can look to great works of fiction, current news stories of churches purchasing debt relief, and deeply sacred personal experiences, and find signs of God's kingdom coming near to us all around.

\*\*\* Transcript \*\*\*

Grace to you and peace from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, on this third Sunday of Epiphany.

Jesus came proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Why did he start with the word "repent?" Because it's a rich word, much more full of meaning than is often attributed to it. Yes, it does mean "to turn around" or "to turn away" from sin. This is most certainly true, to quote Martin Luther. But because it means "to turn around," when paired with "for the kingdom of heaven has come near" it is a call to turn around from what usually grabs our attention, to notice that the kingdom is very, very near to us. This also is most certainly true.

Sometimes though, it's difficult to even define which direction we are already facing. One of my favorite Peanuts cartoons starts with Lucy at her five cent psychology booth, where Charlie Brown has stopped in for advice for life. "Life is like a deck chair Charlie," she says. "On the cruise ship of life, some people place their deck chair at the rear of the ship so they can see where they've been. Others place their deck chair at the front of the ship so they can see where they're going. Where is your deck chair, Charlie Brown?" Without hesitating, Charlie replied glumly, "I can't even get my deck chair unfolded." Ah, such is life sometimes. How can we focus on the direction we're going, when the logistics of life keep us preoccupied? We can't know for sure.

But let us just imagine that Peter or Andrew or James or John, or any of the initial disciples that Jesus called to come follow him, might have been preoccupied with getting their deck chairs unfolded, or their fishing nets untangled. Something they heard in the call from Jesus though, when he asked them to follow him, got them to repent or turn away from the direction they intended to head. They were ready, ready to turn toward seeing God in action. I don't think that means that they only left their fishing nets because their lives were mediocre or boring. They could have very well enjoyed what they were doing, because they were probably very good at it. After all, with Jesus' statement that they would now be fishing for people, he seems to imply that he values the skills they've already honed as fishermen. He says as they follow him he will have them fishing for people. The patience they have learned, the commitment to seeing a job through, maybe the business acumen, or marketing or relational strengths they've developed -- all of what has made them who they are -- can be put into use as they turn to face this new direction, a direction pointed toward seeing God in action, and joining in the process as God reclaims a world in need of redemption. The invitation to join in seeing the kingdom of God coming near would have been far too good to just pass up.

Isn't that so for us as well? No matter what our day jobs are, how we spend our time in school, at home, in a retirement center, on a hospital bed, to turn toward seeing God in action all around us and participating in whatever way possible in what God is doing, well that's a very compelling invitation. Part of responding to the call of Jesus is taking note of the signs of God's presence already near to us. Just like the early disciples were apprentices of Jesus, we are also apprentices who need to learn, to

observe, and to recognize God's nearness: the kingdom of God actually being near to us. A helpful way to remember what some of the values of the kingdom of God are is to look at what is often called Jesus' own mission statement in Luke 4. It states that he came to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and let the oppressed go free. Sometimes we read stories where God's grace is so evident it causes us to catch our breath at its pure beauty. It is then that we see that God has been active in a situation.

Even in fiction we can be inspired to experience the kind of grace depicted that can only come from God's presence, acting in and through a person. Victor Hugo's great novel *Les Misérables*, and the Broadway musical based on the book, is in part the story of a spiritual journey. Jean Valjean is an ex-convict, having served a sentence of 19 years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread. As the novel opens, he is out of prison finally. But he is lost and hungry and cold. He is given shelter and food by a kind and generous bishop. During the night, at the bishop's residence, he wakes up, steals the bishop's silver and plates, and runs away. He's captured by the police, brought back to the bishop's residence in shame to return the stolen items. But before anyone can say a word, the bishop greets Jean Valjean: "There you are. I'm glad to see you. But I gave you the candlesticks also. Why did you not take those with the silver and the plates?" A story like Hugo's, of unexpected forgiveness, and release of a former captive still living under disgrace and shame, is his way of showing what it is like to see the kingdom of God being near.

More often than not we will see the kingdom of God being near in unexpected and surprising ways. Over the past seven months I have periodically asked for prayers for a dear friend Jeanette, who was diagnosed in late June with stage 4 pancreatic cancer. About four months ago, my husband Phil preached a sermon right here in which he described how Jeanette has not yet been made physically well, but now she had recognized that she has been made whole through this ordeal. Since that time Jeanette has been through several more rounds of chemotherapy. This past Tuesday night, Phil and I were present, along with a few friends, at a special birthday party for Jeanette. She is doing relatively well physically -- as much as one can hope for in her situation. With the effects of the chemo, the drain of living with such uncertainty regarding the future have markedly changed her. But not all the changes we observed were for the worst. We went thinking we were there to support and care for our friend, but unexpectedly she ministered to us. We experienced the time with her as sacred. She described how each day has become, for her, an opportunity to experience God's presence in the small things. She told us how she delights in the kindness of others who bring a meal, how she reads and rereads notes of get well wishes and love that she receives, and as she does she thanks God for each person and prays for their needs. Describing her Christmas celebration as a quiet one, it became clear that it was rich with deep and meaningful conversations with her children and husband, as well as a few silly moments sprinkled in. As that evening came to an end, I believe each of us experienced God's kingdom having come near to us. Love, joy, peace, hope renewed, faith uplifted -- the qualities that are only experienced when the God who is love is made known -- were gently present.

One of the last tasks that I'll complete for the church as your interim pastor will be to finalize the annual report that is sent to the ELCA office. One question in the report asks for a yes or no answer to this question: in the last year has someone besides a congregational leader shared a personal story during worship about God's activity in their life? That's a new question this year. But since you know you'll be judged on it next year, you might want to be thinking about that one in advance. In an atmosphere of confusion, contention on the national scene, and stories of concern around our city, it may be more important than ever to find ways for you to express among yourselves signs of God's activity, God's presence breaking in. I know you have them. You are people who exhibit God's grace and kindness. You are very capable of seeing it around you. You have stories and examples to share

that can remind others to see, to know, and to be glad that the kingdom is indeed very near to us.

So as I said earlier, part of responding to the call of Jesus is taking note of the signs of God's presence already near to us. There is at least one other part to responding to the call of Jesus in today's gospel reading. Jesus calls us to repent, to turn around and notice that the kingdom of God is near. And further, Jesus told the early disciples that they would be fishing for people. There they are [motioning to altar display], people caught in the net -- in a good way. He entrusts his ministry to us to effectively make his kingdom known, as we care for people as Jesus would do.

You've likely come across the story that came out about a week ago regarding United Church of Christ congregations and the Deaconess Foundation exhibiting God's kingdom values in an inspiring way. Recognizing that medical debt was oppressing people laboring under its weight prompted 14 UCC (United Church of Christ) congregations in St. Louis to raise about \$60,000 to bring some relief. Together with \$40,000 given by the Deaconess Foundation, they were able to work with a New York based nonprofit called RIP (yes, "Rest In Peace") Medical Debt to purchase \$12.9 million in debt relief. Typically, these unpaid debts have been purchased by a debt collection agency. \$100,000 was used and was able to purchase \$12.9 million in medical debt. That's a pretty good economic move. But the best move is that it was used to help more than 11,000 families across dozens of zip codes in St. Louis and St. Louis County. Last week, each family received yellow envelopes in the mail notifying them that lingering medical bills have been paid. The average amount given was \$1166. Teara Norris, 34, one of the recipients, said that her debt had accumulated mainly for frequent hospital stays and blood transfusions. She said she was born with sickle cell anemia, a blood disorder. "This is going to be a life-changer for my family," she said. She has two children. "I'm going to be able to not worry and stress about the medical bills that I have. It's going to allow me to take better care of my family." When we think of the implications of this, it's natural to think of and wonder about just how life-changing this really is for so many people in our larger community. What kind of difference does this make for the 11,000 families, to be freed at least in part from the burden of debt? But stepping back a bit further to see the bigger picture, I wonder what the impact of this is as thousands of St. Louisans have read this, and a watching world has read this in the international news. And that they might see that the kingdom of God is actually near to us through God's people, and what God's people have done in God's name.

Jesus making disciples into fishers for people often gets described very narrowly, as mostly telling people about Jesus. That is an important aspect and should not be forgotten, of course. But it is also true that our culture in general has heard quite a bit about Jesus. What people are longing for is to see those of us who know we belong to Jesus, showing them by the way we live and act, anticipate, and put into place evidence that God's kingdom is very near, demonstrating by our lives that living in the kingdom means sharing and joining in God's restorative work in all of creation, bringing good news to the poor in ways that bring hope and sustainable life, proclaiming release to those captivated by any number of problems, recovery of sight to those blinded in a myriad of ways, and freeing those oppressed by sin and social ills. God's work. Our hands. That's the ELCA motto. It understands that the kingdom belongs to God, and all of the redemptive work truly does come from God's spirit. But it also understands that we are the hands and the feet and the willing bodies that carry out God's kingdom's work.

I want to look at you just for a few seconds. Not because gazing out and seeing your beloved faces is not already seared deeply within my memory, because it is. But also because I want to envision you and your future. And I want you to pause and think about it as well as you and I turn our focus more and more toward looking for where God is an action, for where the kingdom has come near, and where we can join God wholeheartedly in following Jesus where we are led. It's a beautiful, beautiful vision.

Rejoice, people of God. The kingdom of God is near. And your place in it? Well, it has to be spectacular. Thanks be to God.

\*\*\* Keywords \*\*\*

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