

Good News in Times of Peril
A Sermon on Matthew 11:2-11 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ December 14, 2025

Well, it's kind of a mess out there. I'm not talking about the snow. It seems this might be the most troubling time many of us have seen in our lives. We are in our time of peril. The only good thing about being in our time of peril is that we see the truth more clearly; we are not going to make it through this mess on our own. We understand more clearly, we need to be walking and working together, and we need to stay close to God.

We are in the season of Advent, the church season when we are devoted to making more space in our lives for God. We are trying to make space so there will be more room for God's love to be born into our lives. Today's Gospel reading brings two ideas to mind that are relevant for us who are trying to make space for God's love in a time of peril.

The first idea to sustain us during our time of peril is connected to the final verse of the Gospel passage. *"Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."* The idea of the kingdom of God, or, as we find in the Gospel of Matthew, 'the kingdom of heaven', is a primary theme of Jesus' preaching and ministry. In the Gospel of Matthew, the first words out of Jesus' mouth as he begins preaching are these, *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near to you.*

You and I sometimes think of the kingdom of God as far away, distant, up in the sky somewhere, or as a place we will enter when we die. Some of the people in Jesus' time thought of the kingdom of God as the end time, the time that would come at the end of the world. But Jesus has different ideas about the kingdom of God.

According to Jesus, the kingdom of God is not where you go when you die. The kingdom of God is not in some far, distant end time. Jesus proclaims God's rule is coming closer to us. God's rule is coming into the world in a new way. God's rule is breaking into the world.

People were sometimes afraid or confused when they heard this, but Jesus was preaching Good News. God's rule is all those things we have been trying to practice in our lives: forgiveness, mercy, compassion, courage, creativity, building trust, treating other people and being treated in healthy ways. This is a reason to rejoice. The kingdom of God has come near to us.

This is God's work, not our work. In recent generations some Christians have had the idea of the kingdom of God as something Christians are building. Jesus has a different idea. Jesus tells us God is coming to us. God is coming near to us and bringing God's rule into our lives.

As we move deeper into this season of peril be strengthened by the Good News; God is seeking after us. God's kingdom has come near to us. Be strengthened and guided by God's rule of forgiveness, mercy, compassion, courage, creativity, and love.

The second idea to sustain us during our time of peril is also connected to the words of our Gospel passage about *the kingdom of heaven*. Among the Gospel writers, it is only Matthew who uses this expression, 'the kingdom of heaven'. In the other Gospels Jesus says, 'the kingdom of God.' What is meant by this expression, 'the kingdom of heaven'? Why is Matthew's version different? I want to encourage us to be curious about questions like this when we read Matthew in the coming year. Curiosity is one of the great gifts God has given you.

When we study the Gospel of Matthew, we learn Matthew was the most Jewish of all the Gospel writers. Matthew was born Jewish, he considered himself to be Jewish to the end of his life, and he worshipped with a congregation of Christ followers who were also Jews. More than any of the other Gospels, Matthew proclaims Jesus is the Jewish messiah. Matthew proclaims that those who are followers of Christ are fulfilling the ideals of the Jewish faith.

We find clues pointing to this all through the Gospel. Matthew is the only Gospel that begins with a genealogy leading from Joseph back to King David back to Abraham. Matthew includes several stories about Joseph not found in the other Gospels, because this was more important for his Jewish congregation. The episode where Joseph and Mary take Jesus to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod is especially important to Matthew. The story of the flight into Egypt, found only in the Gospel of Matthew, reminds us of the primal stories of the nation of Israel, such as the story of the slaughter of the innocent babies of Israel by Pharaoh. It reminds us that Jesus is like Moses, because both of them came from Egypt into Judah. This is important for Matthew's Jewish congregation.

As we read through the Gospel we come across one after another situation where Jesus includes a quote from Hebrew scripture in his teaching. There are at least twice as many of these quotations from Hebrew scripture in the Gospel of Matthew compared to the other Gospels. More than any of the other Gospels, Matthew proclaims Jesus is the fulfillment of Hebrew scriptures.

Our next clue that Matthew is the most Jewish of all of the Gospels is found in today's passage. Jesus uses this expression *the kingdom of heaven*. We can be fairly sure this is a situation where Matthew made a little adjustment to Jesus' words. Matthew changed the expression 'kingdom of God' to 'kingdom of heaven' because in his Jewish congregation people went to great lengths to avoid saying the name of God, out of respect for God.

This is how we know Matthew was the most Jewish of all the Gospel writers, but there is more. I want to encourage us to understand more about Matthew and the situation of his life. Some people's lives may depend on us having a better understanding of what is happening in the Gospel of Matthew.

When we keep studying, we learn Matthew was one of the first or second-generation Jewish followers of Christ. During the decades after the first Easter, Christianity continued to function as a branch of Judaism. But as Matthew grew older he noticed something happening within the congregations of Christ followers: more and more of them were Gentiles, and fewer of them were Jews. Matthew was distressed by the fact that the Gospel of Christ was spreading fairly rapidly among the Gentiles, and yet was rejected by many of his Jewish friends and relatives.

Then, about ten years before Matthew composed his Gospel, something terrible and unexpected happened. The Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman Army in the year 70. Prior to the destruction of the Temple there were dozens of different Jewish groups, each with their own sets of practices. This was similar to the current situation for Christians in the United States, where dozens of different churches offer different sets of practices and interpretations of the faith.

After the Temple was destroyed, the Jewish groups closely connected to the Temple, such as the Sadducees, disappeared. The Pharisees were one of the Jewish groups in the best position to survive the destruction of the Temple, because the Pharisees focused on translating Jewish religious practices into daily life. After the destruction of the Temple, the Pharisees became the dominant group.

Eventually Pharisaic Judaism led to the type of Jewish religion we know today, which we call Rabbinic Judaism. But first, the Pharisees had to consolidate power. Jews who were followers of Christ, like Matthew, were excluded from the Synagogues. Matthew went through a time of peril, like us, but probably worse.

Matthew's Gospel ends up being the most Jewish Gospel, but Matthew is also vehemently against the Jewish religious establishment. Do you understand why? The Jewish religious establishment was likely responsible for Jesus' being arrested and persecuted. Matthew has an extra reason for reacting harshly to the Jewish authorities. For Matthew, this was personal. The Jewish religious establishment separated him from his own people. They pushed him out of his own church.

For the sake of our relationships with our Jewish brothers and sisters, it's our responsibility to understand more about the Gospel of Matthew. Some of our most important, helpful passages of

scripture come from Matthew. Some of the most unhelpful passages of scripture also come from Matthew. At St. Paul's, we stopped reading Matthew's account of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus a few years ago, because Matthew's version of the Passion of Christ creates terrible problems for our relationships with our Jewish sisters and brothers. This is not what God intends for us. We are supposed to be members of God's family with them, working together and supporting one another as brothers and sisters.

So, in our time of peril, we turn back to God. We are sustained in the knowledge that God's kingdom has come near to us, and this is God's doing. God is seeking after us. In our time of peril, we are sustained by God's grace.

In our time of peril, we are also strengthened by our ability to be curious and our ability to learn more of the truth. We are strengthened by turning away from hatred and division and turning toward God's way, which always means learning more of the truth. In our time of peril, we seek to make more room for God's truth and love in our lives.