

Holy God, we yearn for Your presence; we long for illumination from the riches of Your Word. Teach us, Lord, that we may love You more deeply and give ourselves more completely to Your truth. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

“The kingdom of heaven has come near!” At the heart of the Gospel of Matthew is a claim that radical transformation is at hand, unfolding before the very eyes of the Roman emperor and his legions of soldiers. “The kingdom of heaven has come near!” Roared by the wild prophet John the Baptist, then taught by Jesus himself,¹ this bold claim lays siege to every wall and shatters the bars of every prison,² establishing God’s love as the power that is dominant in the cosmos.

Yet we might doubt. A reasonable person could be skeptical.

“The kingdom of heaven is at hand”—really? *Christ is our peace*, the apostle Paul said³ two thousand years ago, yet we still see intractable conflicts across the globe. *God is love*, the evangelist John said in as many ways as he knew how,⁴ yet the past two millennia have witnessed countless cruelties wrought in human community. As ancient Jews and Christians staggered under the capacious brutality of Roman emperors, so today the vulnerable continue to stagger under the horrors of our post-industrial age. No: it is simply not believable that the “kingdom of heaven” is unfolding among us—the rationalist objects—when so many writhe under the cruel grip of empire.⁵

Matthew knows the counter-arguments.

Matthew knows what it's like to live at grave risk.

He knows there are those who wake up every morning in fearsome precarity.⁶

Yet Matthew insists that the kingdom of heaven has begun to unfold in the ministry of Jesus Christ.⁷ It is the chief work of the Gospel of Matthew to show how that claim can be true.

Jesus has come, and “the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light,”

Matthew says, quoting Isaiah.⁸

Jesus has come “proclaiming the good news of the kingdom” and curing “every disease and every sickness,” Matthew tells us, with healing story upon healing story.⁹

Jesus has come, and he teaches, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,”¹⁰ Matthew theologizes, running directly at the problem of the apparent victory of the principalities and powers over God. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”!

Light and healing and blessing: promises of the Gospel, for those who yield to the grace of God's transforming work.

My husband and I live near Long Island Sound, and we love to walk along the beach in the early evening. There's a jetty onto which we walk to get closer to the

cormorants and terns. A couple of months ago we walked out onto the jetty and one of the brownstone blocks moved when I stepped on it. Yikes! Proceeding with caution, we saw further down that the massive block of stone at the end of the jetty was skewed, tilting at a dramatic angle into the water. Other changes were more subtle, but we realized that winter storms, with their powerful tides, had knocked several huge blocks out of alignment. We were astonished. Long Island Sound is an estuary—it doesn't have giant crashing waves. The tides in Old Saybrook normally lap at the sand in ripples or in waves about a foot high.

So: one way to envision the kingdom of heaven is to imagine the gradual but relentless force of water. Ocean waves and currents move sandbars, create new channels,¹¹ and wear away coastlines, changing the configuration of whole communities. Freshwater rivers and streams move powerfully through inland landscapes, digging grooves that deepen into gullies, ravines, even canyons. Against every barrier or obstacle—working unseen—waves, tides, and streams can make a way where there was no way.

We might also imagine the kingdom of heaven as the bursting growth of summer plants and foliage. Not far from our house is a lovely meadow. In late March, nothing is in bloom; the grass is flat and dry. But by mid-summer, the meadow has come alive with luxuriant green plants and flowering shrubs. There are tall grasses and creeping vines, daisies and black-eyed Susans and delicate threadleaf coreopsis. The meadow is dense with purple spiderwort and yellow foxtail, wild

strawberries at ground level and blackberry thickets waist-high. Slender oak saplings bend in the breeze.¹² Butterflies dance from flower to flower; bees hum; sparrows and swifts dart overhead. The grasses grow so tall that in high summer, deer in the meadow are visible only by the tops of their ears.

Think about waves. Think about meadows.

Though justice may sometimes be hard to see in our suffering world, we can trust the overwhelming power of God to break down every barrier. If waves, tides, and rivers are powerful, how much more powerful is the One who made them at the dawn of creation!

Though violence seems to have a stranglehold on human communities and ecosystems, we can trust the irrepressible power of God to bring forth new life. If a meadow beaten down by winter can spring back into luxuriant life, how much more irrepressible is the power of the One who is Life itself!

“The kingdom of heaven has come near!” This morning, in his ceaseless work to show how that claim can be true, Matthew offers us parables. First, the mustard seed: a lesson of the spectacular and unstoppable growth of the kingdom from the most unassuming of beginnings. Next, yeast: the kingdom of heaven is like yeast hidden in an extravagant amount, three measures being something like 46 pounds

of flour: the yeast works on all of it.¹³ Finally, treasure hidden in a field: initially unseen but worth everything we have!

Mustard seed, yeast, and buried treasure:
 the kingdom of heaven is breathtakingly fruitful,
 hidden yet catalytic,
 of incomparable value.¹⁴

Hidden but irresistible forces are all around us. Ocean waves ... summer growth in a meadow ... yeast causing bread to rise.

Subtle, unseen, yet catalytic—

just like you, beloved in Christ.

Your courage, your creativity, your ministry of presence may seem insignificant. But every time you work toward a little more justice in the world, a little more beauty, a little more love, you are hastening the transformation that God has begun in Christ.¹⁵

Maybe you're all about prophetic witness: naming injustice wherever you see it, marching, inviting others to join you in wearing down barriers of ignorance and cruelty. *Be that ocean wave* beating at the shores of injustice! You won't change the landscape all at once. But pray without ceasing,¹⁶ and over time, your resolve will hasten the inbreaking of the kingdom.

Maybe your gift is music or art. Delve into creativity for all you're worth! Every motet you sing, every quilt or watercolor you make will nurture the blossoming of beauty and invite others to explore their own creativity in ever-expanding networks of joy.¹⁷ *Be that luxuriant meadow* of grasses and flowering shrubs! Rejoice in the Lord always,¹⁸ and your creativity will foster the growth of the kingdom of heaven.

Maybe your gift is a listening ear. Listen as deeply as you can to your anxious coworker, to the unhappy stranger at the bus stop. *Be the leaven!* Let all that you do be done in love,¹⁹ and your compassionate listening will be catalytic for the action of God's love in your family, in your community, and out into the world.

The kingdom of heaven is at hand—

right here, right now,

crashing like waves against injustice,

growing irrepressibly like meadow grasses,

leavening all that sustains the world!

It's here—

and *you are marked by its grace*²⁰

through the One Who in whom all will be revealed:²¹

Jesus Christ,

to whom be all honor, glory, and praise, now and forever. Amen.

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Proper 12A

Gen 29:15-28; Psalm 128; Rom 8:26-39; Matt 13:31-33, 44-52

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¹ Matt 3:2 and 4:17.

² See Ps 107:10-16; Isa 45:1-2 and 61:1, the latter passage publicly claimed by Jesus at the inauguration of his ministry in Luke 4:16-22.

³ Eph 2:14.

⁴ In many passages, the Fourth Gospel explores the love among Father, Son, and believers (see e.g. 14:15-31; 15:9-17; 17:26), and Jesus says, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34). This new commandment is elaborated in the Johannine epistles: "For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.... We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another.... Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.... This is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another" (1 John 3:11, 14, 18, 23); "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.... If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us (1 John 4:7-12). See also the rest of 1 John 4 and 2 John 5-6.

⁵ On 27 July 2017, *The New York Times* [reported on Yazidi women](#) freed from ISIS captivity who have suffered severe physical and psychological damage from years of sexual assault; some have been shocked virtually into catatonia. On the disastrous harm caused by extreme poverty at every conceivable level (physical, psychological, spiritual, cultural, social, and political), see Katherine Boo's award-winning non-fiction work, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity* (New York: Random House, 2012). See [here](#) for a June 2017 review of U.S. Census Bureau tract data by the publication 24/7 Wall Street of the top 20 U.S. cities hit hardest by extreme poverty. Those cities, listed from least to most affected by poverty and related high incidences of crime, poor health care, and lower educational attainment rates, are: Albuquerque, Las Vegas, Miami-Fort Lauderdale, Cleveland, Scranton-Wilkes Barre, Sacramento, Syracuse, Riverside-San Bernardino, Daytona Beach, Lakeland-Winter Haven, Buffalo,

Tucson, Detroit, Sarasota, Youngstown, Fresno, Indianapolis, Toledo, and Bakersfield. Experts note that many people live below the International Poverty Line of \$ 1.90 per day. A [March 2017 piece](#) by Max Roser and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina notes that gains have been made: “the share of people living in extreme poverty” as a percentage of total population “has decreased continuously over the course of the last two centuries.” Nevertheless, they report that researchers have calculated that 705 million people lived in extreme poverty in 2015.

⁶ Material found only in the Gospel of Matthew (25:31-46) says we will be designated for eternal life or eternal punishment based on whether we have ministered to those who are hungry, thirsty, alone and unsupported (“the stranger”), naked, sick, and imprisoned. Clearly, those living in precarity are at the heart of theological and pastoral concern in this Gospel.

⁷ See the post-resurrection account in Matthew 28. “When they saw him [Jesus], they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations....’” (28:17-19a).

⁸ Matt 4:16, quoting Isa 9:2. Hildegard of Bingen, too, figures prophecy with a metaphor of seeing light. In her thirteenth vision, the heavenly choirs hymn the patriarchs and prophets as ones “who traversed the hidden ways,/ And looked with the eyes of the spirit, and in lucent shadows/ Announced the Living Light that would bud from the stem/ Which blossomed alone from the Light that rooted within it!” See Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias* 3.3 (The Classics of Spirituality; trans. Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop; New York: Paulist Press, 1990, p. 526).

⁹ Matt 4:23; healing stories may be found throughout the Gospel, and in Matt 10:1, the disciples are commissioned to heal.

¹⁰ Matt 5:3.

¹¹ Ocean waves change shorelines all the time. On Cape Cod, coastal geologists have to redraw maps of channels, shoals, and breaks at Chatham regularly. Major breaks in 1987 and 2007 were joined by a new break in April 2017 that has created significant navigational challenges.

¹² The beauty of meadows may remind us of the rhapsodic words of Hildegard of Bingen about Paradise: “Paradise is the place of delight, which blooms with the freshness of flowers and grass and the charms of spices, full of fine odors and dowered with the joy of blessed souls, giving invigorating moisture to the dry ground; it supplies strong force to the earth, as the soul gives strength to the body, for Paradise is not darkened by shadow or the perdition of sinners” (*Scivias* 1.28; *Hildegard of Bingen*, p. 86.)

¹³ The σάτον was approximately a peck and a half; three measures would be 39 liters of flour—roughly 46 pounds—and, according to various authorities, enough to make bread to feed 110 to 150 people. The Greek verb is not actually “mixed in” but “hid”—she *hid* yeast in this massive amount of flour—which connects this parable to the treasure parable, with its similar verb. The verb “to hide” with regard to the yeast is ἐγκρύπτω, which occurs only here and at the parallel passage in Luke 13:21; the verb for the treasure “hidden” in the field (Matt 13:44) is κρύπτω.

¹⁴ Ben Witherington III notes that leaven was considered unclean, then cites medieval commentators on the woman kneading the dough being a figure of Wisdom. He reaches a bit beyond plausibility, in my view, when he concludes, “The woman is surely Jesus, fulfilling the role of Wisdom, working his ‘unclean’ message into Jewish society, and being optimistic about the final eschatological outcome” (*Matthew* [Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006], p. 270).

¹⁵ These parables teach us about the hiddenness and truth of God’s redemptive work in Christ. The teaching suggests much regarding Christian mission and ministry. As Ulrich Luz puts it, “The church has the task of uncovering the hidden truth by word and deed (10:26-27, cf. 5:13-16). In so doing it leavens the world” (*Matthew* 8-20 [Hermeneia; trans. James E. Crouch; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001], p. 263).

¹⁶ 1 Thess 5:17.

¹⁷ I find compelling the “rhizomatic” vision of queer theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid, who eschews metaphors of hierarchical filiation in favor of the image of a web of connections growing wild and untrammled. She offers a view of Scripture engagement that may be liberative for LGBTQ+ folks who have been harmed by violent readings of our sacred texts. Althaus-Reid writes of a “complex God whose pleasure may be to engage in multiple combinations and exchanges. . . . At this point, we can start our work of biblical permutation following a rhizomatic network of exegesis. This should work by connecting elements according to our own heart’s desires, without consideration of pre-privileged structures or hierarchical paths which have been put in place to guarantee exegetical results in a frame of hegemonic unity and harmony. . . . A rhizomatic way of reading . . . displaces the ‘root-tree’ model of thinking and searches instead for horizontal connections, almost unlimited in the sense that there is no privileging conceptual movements or class systems of connections amongst the different elements of our exegesis” (*The Queer God* [New York: Routledge, 2003], p. 88).

¹⁸ Phil 4:4.

¹⁹ 1 Cor 16:14. The three Scriptural exhortations (*pray without ceasing, rejoice in the Lord always, let all that you do be done in love*) constitute a theologically profound triad that, in my view, expresses the heart of the Christian life. I use them liturgically as a hortatory preface to the final blessing.

²⁰ My allusion here is to believers' citizenship in the kingdom of heaven through the merits of Christ conferred in baptism: "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever" (see the Episcopal 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 308). See Eph 2:19, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God"; Phil 3:20, "Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ"; and 1 Peter 1:3, "By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you."

²¹ See Matt 11:25-27; 13:10-17.