

Date: Sept. 29, 2024

Texts: Daniel 7. 1-14 / Rev. 3. 1-10

Title: "TJINK - Kingdom: Wheat Among Weeds"

Intro -

cf. - back when I was in High School, maybe - first year of college -
books by Hal Lindsey were quite popular in certain sectors of
the church -

"The Late, Great, Planet Earth"

- the inside scoop on the book of Revelation...

what's going to happen in "the end times..."

just what does it all mean?

cf. - you may be more familiar with all this from the "Left Behind" series
of 20 or so years ago...

(same basic premises...)

in Lindsey - he confidently identified each and every obscure, symbolic
aspect with then - current peoples, nations, and weapons systems
i.e. - the ten members of the European Common Market were clearly
seen in the beast with ten horns...

the buzzing locusts were Apache attack helicopters
and so on.

I was captivated...

and wanted to be sure my ex-girlfriend read the book because...

I may have broken ups with her, but I didn't want that
to be the reason she was "left behind..."

now, lest you think I went overboard, consider that Philip Yancey and
his brother took classes in Chinese and Russian while in HS
so that at least one of them could communicate with

the invading armies - no matter where they came from...

and then - consider this:

visions of the end times have bubbled to the surface -

- throughout church history: during the first decades of Christianity
and then again around the year 1,000 AD (go figure... nothing
like that happened when we were in charge of a
millennium...)... and then again in the 1300's...
during the time of Napoleon... WW I... WW III...
the Gulf War (Saddam Hussein, anyone...?)
and... it's possible that some of these histrionics might be present
even in today's discourses
similar to what went on while Jesus walked this earth...
similar to expectations that swirled around as he preached,
and taught, and healed...
what kind of kingdom have people looked for...?
what kind of kingdom do we seek...?
cf. - Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God more than any other topic
- what did he have to say...?
- what did he show it to be all about...?

I) Kingdom

not surprisingly - Jewish scholars were pouring over the same passages
from Daniel and Ezekiel as we do (even if the EU had yet to even be
remotely considered...)
not surprisingly - they got it just as wrong as we do today
note - per Yancey:
"The scribes who pored so assiduously over Old Testament prophecies did not
recognize Jesus as the fulfillment of those prophecies.
Should not their failure to interpret signs of the first coming
sound a note of caution to those today who so confidently
proclaim signs of the Second Coming?"
cf. - Jesus came as the Messiah, but -
Jesus also understood the explosive power of the word: *Messiah*...
and as such - never used it of himself -

so as not to distract from the true purpose of his coming
in the commonly held view of the day -

Messiah would come to restore the Kingdom -

a Kingdom of power and might...

a Kingdom of bloodshed, leading to peace -

a peace wherein the Jewish people ruled

and yet - Jesus also preached that the Kingdom was near

so...

what's up with that?

cf. - while there is no getting around the fact that the people would have

heard one thing (worldly power and glory) -

Jesus was talking about another...

about a different kind of Kingdom

a Kingdom that meant denying yourself...

taking up a cross...

renouncing wealth... even loving your enemies

(you might see in this how Jesus lost the crowds that he once had

in the palm of his hand...)

i.e. - The word *kingdom* meant one thing to Jesus and quite another to

the crowd. Jesus was rejected, in large part, because he did not

measure up to a national image of what a Messiah was

supposed to look like

and yet...

Jesus kept arousing his followers' hopes with talk of kingdom

(it appears some 53 times in Matthew alone...)

what exactly did he mean...?

II) What Jesus Meant

cf. - if you want to know what Jesus meant - you need to look to

the parables - where he told a series of stories showing us

what *the kingdom is like*...

stories that came from everyday sketches of farming... fishing...
baking bread... selling and buying pearls...
stories of a farmer going out to sow his seed...
stories about a mustard seed - the smallest of all seeds -
and yet - a seed that grows into a bush that
outshines all others in the garden...
stories of sacrifices made to purchase a pearl of great beauty -
and never regretting what was given up to gain
what was sought...
stories that we can connect with on a visceral level...

as opposed to:

the then common (and - common today...)
images of power and conquest (which usually require
images of the vanquished and defeated...)
all of which seems somehow at odds with the ethos of Jesus...

the problem is -

it's all inbred with the ethos of humanity...
the "ethos of us"

cf. - we tend to conceive of kingdoms in terms of power and polarization...
of revolution and uprising...

- two centuries ago in the U.S. and France the oppressed rose up
and overturned the reigning powers...
- later, in places like Russia and China, Marxists led revolts with
an ideology that became a kind of religion...
- when I was in seminary, something called "Liberation Theology"
was quite in vogue - calling for violent revolution to liberate
the masses in third world countries...

but Jesus' message had nothing to do with the politics of polarization...

and - people who looked to Jesus as their political savior
were constantly let down

something else was at play in Jesus...

something else was offered

Yancey writes:

“In short, Jesus honored the dignity of people, whether he agreed with them or not. He would not found his kingdom on the basis of race or class or other such divisions...”

I feel convicted by this quality of Jesus every time I get involved in a cause I strongly believe in. How easy it is to join the politics of polarization, to find myself shouting across the picket lines at the “enemy” on the other side...”

all the while...

forgetting Jesus’ challenge (dare we say: “command”?)
to love our enemies...

“A political movement by nature draws lines, makes distinctions, pronounces judgment.... in contrast -

Jesus’ love cuts across lines, transcends distinctions, and dispenses grace.”

- regardless of the merits of a given issue...

political movements risk pulling onto themselves the mantle of power that smothers love...

relate - if you want to know what Jesus’ kingdom looks like -

consider any of the “He Gets Us” ads that air on TV
mostly, it seems, on sports broadcasts

(at least, that’s where I see them... maybe because sports fans are quintessentially polarized...)

- Jesus didn’t preach hate...

He washed feet.

- Jesus welcomed everyone at the table
(where we close the doors...)

note - whenever we are tempted to see the kingdom of God
as one more power structure in the world...

sounds better, but - really...

no different than any other power structure...

Yancey suggests we turn to the account of a trial in Jerusalem
that brought together two kings in "striking apposition"

Herod - the epitome of worldly power -

legions of Roman soldiers to do his bidding...

no one to stand up to him when he stepped over the line

(which he did - all the time...)

and Jesus - who refused coercive power...

who knowingly let one of his followers betray him...

who surrendered peacefully to an unjust arrest...

who forgave his enemies from the cross

Yancey observes: "despite Jesus' plain example, many of his followers have
been unable to resist choosing the way of Herod over the way of Jesus..."

ironically - our respect in the world declines in proportion to how vigorously we
attempt to force others to adopt our point of view..."

so... - is there a better way...?

III) A "Secret Power"

cf. - consider Jesus' own metaphors of the kingdom and how they describe
a kind of "secret power" that works from within:

sheep among wolves, a tiny seed in the garden,

yeast in bread dough, salt in meat...

Jesus said nothing of a triumphant church sharing power with authorities

rather -

we are to be as wheat among the weeds...

yeast in the dough...

working quietly, but -

effecting change

and it is here that Yancey offers an aside -

(he wrote this book in 1995, but it carries forward into today...)

“I worry about the recent surge of power among U.S. Christians, who seem to be focusing more and more on political means.

Once Christians were ignored or scorned; now they are courted by every savvy politician...

This trend troubles me because the gospel of Jesus was not primarily a political platform...

Jesus did not say: “All people will know you are my disciples if you just pass laws, suppress immorality, and restore decency to family and government...

rather - he said: “... if you love one another”

and we only find ourselves in a position to love one another...

if we are with one another... among one another...

side by side with those whom we are called to love -

who include - according to Jesus - our enemies...

as we reflect on the nature of the kingdom Jesus brought to this earth, and - our place in it - as we look forward to the kingdom Jesus promises

- we must ask ourselves:

Is our first aim to change the external, political kingdom or - to further God’s transcendent kingdom?

- In a nation like the U.S., the two easily get confused...

our challenge in this setting...

our challenge in this time...

is to strive to be God’s kingdom...

in an increasingly hostile world

i.e. - We in the church, Jesus’ successors - are left with the task of

displaying the signs of the kingdom of God, and the watching world will judge the merits of the kingdom by us.

cf. - a far more challenging task than trying to effect change in the political realm
(and we all know how hard that is...)

but -

a far more important calling

cf. - we live in a transitional time:

a transition from death to life, from human injustice to
divine justice, from the old to the new...

The reign of God is breaking into the world,
and we can be its heralds...