

December 7, 2025 – Isaiah 11:1-10 & Matthew 3:1-12

The past two years have been one of the bloodiest eras in the modern history of the Middle East. Since the attack by Hamas on Israel on October 7, 2023, thousands of people have been killed. Israelis were taken hostage, tortured, and executed. Women and children have died in collateral damage. And countless civilians have suffered due to disease and hunger. Thankfully, the intensity of the conflict seems to have diminished, but there's no telling how long this respite will last.

To a degree, we're desensitized to this fact. It seems like there's always some sort of violence going on in the Middle East, after all. But did you know that there was actually a period of time when Muslims, Christians, and Jews peacefully coexisted in the city of Jerusalem? During the 12th and 13th centuries following the first crusade, an independent kingdom was established in Palestine. One governed primarily by Christians, but which generally tolerated, accommodated, and made peace with all the various religions and cultures of the region.

It was known then as the Kingdom of Jerusalem, but modern filmmaker Ridley Scott referred to it as the Kingdom of Heaven in his movie of the same name. Because, in his view, the Kingdom of Heaven is about peace between nations and the ability to set aside religious differences for the common good. And those 200 years were as close as Palestine has come in the last two thousand years to fulfilling that goal.

Which is all well and good, to a degree. Peace is certainly a noble goal and there are plenty of times when we as Christians should work with those of a different faith for a common good, if for no other reason than to demonstrate Christian love and charity. But civil peace alone really isn't the Kingdom of Heaven. It's a good and Godly goal. But when Matthew writes about John the Baptist's message in our Gospel lesson, he has something very different in mind.

*"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."* These are the very first words we hear out of John's mouth, the very first impression we get of him. And for a Jew living in that era, those words would have left a very strong impression indeed.

For I'm fairly certain that the kingdom of heaven was a concept well known to Jews of his day. But it had very little to do with peace. In fact, it had to do with war. The violent recapture of Jerusalem from Roman control. The coming revolution that would carve out a new Jewish kingdom from the occupying forces.

That was heaven on earth for a Jew back then. In fact, that is still heaven on earth for many Jews now. Jerusalem has been and always shall be the very center of Judaism. It's more than just a place to worship. The city itself, the very substance of the earth and rock that it rests upon, are holy. It is Zion. The hill of God. The temple mount. The dwelling place of the most high. Judaism without Jerusalem is like a man without a heart. It just isn't even alive anymore.

And Jerusalem's power radiates throughout the entire region of Palestine. This is the Promised Land, after all. This is their inheritance from their father Abraham. God helped them conquer nation after nation to bring them into this land, from the Egyptians during the exodus to the Canaanites under Joshua to the Philistines under King David. If a Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, like John says, then Jerusalem is where it will start and all of Palestine is where it will spread. Until, finally, they have their nation back.

That's probably what they thought. But that's not at all what John intended. In fact, John soon lays a bombshell on them that probably rocked them to the core: The Kingdom of Heaven is coming, but God couldn't care less whether it's populated by the biological descendants of Abraham. Don't get me wrong, God's covenant promises to his people will all be fulfilled. Every one of them. But John makes clear that God isn't interested in earthly kingdoms.

What is God interested in? Well, for one thing, repentance. The confession of their sinfulness before God. The recognition that they are not owed anything by God. That just because someone slaps the label of Jew, or Christian, or Lutheran, or member of Immanuel Lutheran Church on themselves does not mean that God must do anything for them.

We have no contract with God. We have not brokered a deal with him. Our church attendance, offering, or faith itself are not dues paid into an organization that guarantees us certain rights. And if he wanted to, God could sweep every one of us into the fire and think nothing more of it than when we burn a pile grass clippings and leaves off our yard.

As far as God is concerned, we are all on equal ground. We are all sinners and we all need his grace. Which is really what the second half of John's message is about. The Kingdom of Heaven isn't a city. It isn't a mountain. It isn't a region. It isn't a nation. If you're looking for the Kingdom of Heaven, it's not about where you look. It's about to whom you look.

The Kingdom of Heaven has come near in Jesus Christ. Because the Kingdom of Heaven exists wherever and whenever Jesus is present. And as we find out in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus comes near to any repentant sinner who puts their trust in his mercy. "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" That may have been how Matthew chose to introduce us to John the Baptist, but if we turn one chapter forward, we also find that it's exactly how he introduces us to Jesus as well.

And as we read through Matthew's Gospel, we find that the Kingdom of Heaven isn't just a catchy phrase that Jesus throws out once in his ministry. It is the very substance of Jesus' message. 25 separate times, Jesus talks about the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew's Gospel. 31 times the phrase is used. You cannot look at Jesus, listen to Jesus, or talk to Jesus without seeing a glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven, because he is the embodiment of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Where Jesus Christ is, there heaven is. Which means there is no safer place in all the earth than standing by His side. There is no greater peace in all the earth than that which is found with the one who has conquered sin, death, and the devil on our behalf. There is no greater gift in all the earth than the one found lying in a manger one silent night long ago.

The people heard John the Baptist preach and looked to Jerusalem for their hope. But it was in Bethlehem that the Kingdom of Heaven first came near. And his power didn't just radiate to the ends of Palestine. His greatness reached to the ends of the earth. And he wasn't there to lead Israel into war. But to offer peace to all peoples.

Isaiah gives us a picture of that peace in today's Old Testament reading. A peace far greater than any kingdom ever carved out by human hands. "*There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,*" Isaiah says, "*and the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him.*" That shoot is Christ. That branch is the Child of Bethlehem. And the peace He brings is not political compromise or a temporary cease-fire. It is the peace of righteousness. The peace of sins forgiven. The peace of creation restored.

Isaiah's vision stretches far beyond the manger and even beyond the cross. He shows us what the reign of this King looks like when it finally comes in its fullness on the last day: "*The wolf shall dwell with the lamb... the lion shall eat straw like the ox... and a little child shall lead them.*" This isn't poetry for its own sake. This is the promise of a world set right again. A world where violence is ended. A world where fear is no more. A world where nothing "hurts or destroys" on God's holy mountain.

That is the Kingdom of Heaven John proclaimed. That is the Kingdom that drew near in Jesus. And that is the Kingdom we now wait for with longing hearts. For even though Christ has already come and brought His peace to sinners like us, the world around us still groans. Conflict still rages. Suffering still surrounds us.

But the King is coming. The shoot from Jesse is alive, risen, and reigning. And when He comes again, the peace He brought to Bethlehem's manger will fill every corner of creation. Until then, we repent, we hope, and we look to Him. For where Christ is, there is the Kingdom of Heaven. Amen.