

Isaiah 7:10–16 (NRSV)

¹⁰ Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying,
¹¹ Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹² But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. ¹³ Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also?
¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.
¹⁵ He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶ For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

Isaiah 40:1–5 (NRSV)

¹ Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD’s hand
double for all her sins.
³ A voice cries out:
“In the wilderness prepare the way of the
LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for
our God.
⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made
low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
⁵ Then the glory of the LORD shall be
revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

Isaiah and the Kingdom of God

In the Lectionary (the three-year schedule of suggested Scripture readings), each Sunday has a reading from the OT, from a Psalm, from a Gospel, and from a NT epistle. Thus, for the four weeks of Advent there are twelve OT readings over the three years – and seven of them are from Isaiah. Let’s look at why.

Isaiah consists of two portions. So-called “First Isaiah,” chapters 1-39, was written more than 700 years before Jesus, when the northern kingdom of Israel was overrun and destroyed by the Assyrians. Portions of “First Isaiah” look ahead to a time when all of God’s people would be restored under God’s rule. In other words, the prophet Isaiah looked ahead to the coming of God’s kingdom, when all things would be put right.

So-called “Second Isaiah,” chapters 40-66, was written during the time of the Babylonian exile, about 500 years before Jesus. In the midst of the Jews’ crushing pain and despair, this prophet brought them comforting promises of a time when God would raise up a Savior who would usher in God’s rule. And in God’s kingdom, there would be no blind, no deaf, no lame, no poor – no hurts.

It is an expression of God’s love that the most hopeful images of God’s kingdom were written during Israel’s time of deepest darkness.

Jesus came for all, but especially for the least among us.

A dark room seems that much darker when we’ve stepped into it from the bright outdoors. Moviemakers will use one spot of color in a black-and-white image to heighten dramatically the contrast. Christmas is a time of much joy and happiness for many of us, but that very joy can serve to deepen the loneliness of those who are alone and the suffering of those who hurt. The pain of divorce, job loss, death, and illness can all be made worse by the Christmas season.

There are two enduring characters in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*: Scrooge and Tiny Tim. Last week, we observed that in Scrooge we could see the Christian story of transformation, of repentance and rebirth. This is a story that most of us understand. We might not fully appreciate it or make it our own, but we get it. However, Tiny Tim's story is one about the arrival of God's kingdom and this story is one that few of us really "get."

"Yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Matthew 11:11)¹

"Advent" comes from the Latin for "arrival." In Advent, we await the arrival of the baby Jesus. But on a deeper level, we await the arrival of God's Messiah and the world's Savior. And on a yet deeper level, we await the arrival of God and God's kingdom.² Of course, at Christmas now, we actually celebrate Jesus' coming 2,000 years ago while we await his second coming. In the same way, we celebrate the arrival of God's kingdom nearly 2,000 years ago while we await Jesus' return and the full consummation of the kingdom. (See the "appendix" at the end of this study for more on this.)

In *A Christmas Carol*, Tiny Tim is one of the "least." He is poor, crippled, and will likely die before long. He is trapped in the mire of pain and suffering that plagues so much of our world. Nonetheless, he is anxious to go to church on Christmas so that others will be reminded who it is that made the lame walk. He is filled with joy and is "as good as gold and better" in his father's eyes and even Scrooge's. Tiny Tim represents the most tragic and the most hopeful aspects of this world. It is as if Paul is thinking about Tiny Tim when he reminds Christians that we are the ones "upon whom the ends of the ages have met" (1 Corinthians 10:11). Indeed, through Scrooge's repentance and rebirth, Tiny Tim will be healed. He will be made whole, for the "lame shall leap like a deer" (Isaiah 35:6) in God's kingdom. Jesus' healings were more than acts of compassion; they were enactments of the reality of God's kingdom. In the kingdom there are no blind, no deaf, no lame, no loneliness, no hurting, no pain, no death. And this kingdom is not a just a future event; it has already been ushered in by Christ, though there is still much work to be done.

Our hurts are expressions of a broken world; the Christchild is the hope of a renewed world. *But* it is not as if our hurts then magically disappear. We don't throw the hurts of this world into a bowl with the healing of the kingdom so that we can mix them together, expecting to erase our pains. It is more like we clutch onto the reality of God's

"Thy Kingdom Come"

When it comes to comprehending that the kingdom of God is a present, though not yet fully manifest, reality, the Lord's Prayer can actually work against us if we are not thoughtful. The phrase "Thy kingdom come" might lead us to think that the kingdom is only a future event. How might we come to see it as present also?

When I see volunteers pushing carts of food across the parking lot to families in need, I see the kingdom of God present. When I see a baptism, I see the kingdom present. When we gather for Holy Communion, I can feel the presence of the kingdom in the faces of the congregation. These are all brief snatches of grace-filled time when all is right and good and loving. However brief such experiences might be, it is as if we have stepped into another world, into the kingdom, into the place where the God of love and mercy and rules.

There are more such moments than we think. We just often don't recognize them for what they are. As Philip Yancey puts it, we miss the "rumors of another world." Yancey urges us to have stereoscopic vision, able to view both the seen world and the unseen.

¹ Jesus is speaking of John the Baptist here.

²The challenge is to make this kingdom-talk concrete. Just imagine what it would be like to live in a land in which God is king. Or more concrete still – imagine that you live in a nation ruled by Jesus of Nazareth, the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount. And imagine that the heart of every person in this place has been reshaped into the heart of Jesus. That is what we mean by "the kingdom of God."

kingdom, so that its healing and hope carry us through the dark days and past our hurts, for there is *nothing* that “can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39).

The birth of Jesus was an event of cosmic significance, turning the world upside-down. In God’s kingdom, the meek shall inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5). In God’s kingdom, the least, such as Tiny Tim, are greater than John the Baptist. This may sound like nothing more than nice sentiment or it might even simply strike you as outlandish – but it is true nonetheless! And the sooner we live out the reality of God’s kingdom in this world, the sooner we will grasp the true meaning of Christmas. “God bless Us, Everyone!

Final thoughts and a few questions

When I reread *A Christmas Carol* recently, I was most struck by the word images that Dickens paints on the last pages. When Scrooge is reborn after the visit of the final Ghost, he sees the world as he never saw it before. It is not like he lost his mind or disconnected from reality; it is more like he donned Yancey’s stereoscopic glasses and could see the present reality of God’s kingdom. That morning, Scrooge’s world became a place filled with generosity and laughter. Scrooge didn’t mind that people made fun of him as time went on. He could see the other world, the City of God, even if others were blind to it, and that was enough for him. Tiny Tim’s healing is another enactment of God’s kingdom. By the grace of God, Scrooge repented, truly, and became the instrument of Tiny Tim’s salvation.

How might understanding ourselves as individuals and a community living in two worlds (the City of God and the city of this world) change us -- our lives, our priorities – even our congregation? Are we forced to divided loyalties? Gordon Fee, a leading NT scholar, wrote that if he were going to return to be the pastor of a local church (as he once was), he “. . . would set about with a single-minded passion to help a local body of believers recapture the New Testament church’s understanding of itself as an eschatological community.” What he means is a community that lives between times, in two worlds. How could such an understanding be so important? Why would he say such thing?

Richard Hays, a UMC ordained pastor and scholar, writes, “. . . the redemptive power of God has already broken into the present time, and the form of this world is passing away.” What do you think our role is to be in the consummation of God’s kingdom? Should we quietly await Jesus’ return and watch the present world “pass away?” Or are we to do all we can to renew creation and make God’s kingdom a present reality? If renewal is our responsibility, what can we actually do? What did Scrooge do?

The Already/Not yet Arrival of the Kingdom of God

Jesus the Messiah

Jesus came talking about fulfillment of the Jewish hope and demonstrating the reality of God’s kingdom. In God’s kingdom there are no blind or lame, so Jesus made the blind see and the lame walk. Though most Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah, some did. In the years immediately after Jesus’ resurrection, these followers of Jesus, all of whom were Jewish, had a problem. They proclaimed to all who would listen that Jesus truly was the long-expected Messiah, but it was also clear that evil and tragedy and suffering were still present in the world. Using Figure 1 as a guide, it’s as if the Messiah had come, but the Kingdom of God had not! To the average Jew, the answer was simple – Jesus wasn’t really the Messiah, hence the world still awaited the coming of the Kingdom of God.

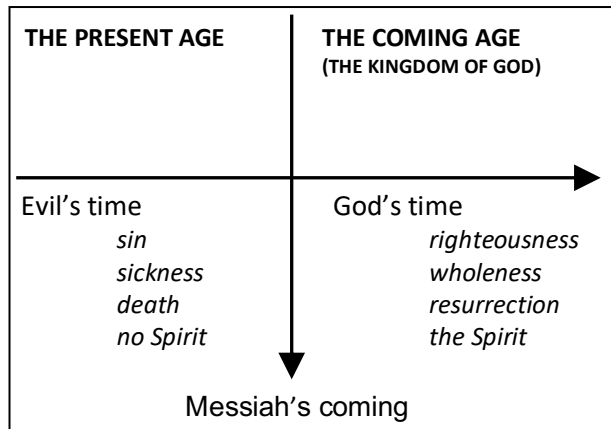


Figure 1. Jewish expectations in Jesus' day
(figures from Fee's *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*)

had happened. In the writings of the New Testament, we see a new perspective emerging, as depicted in Figure 2 below.

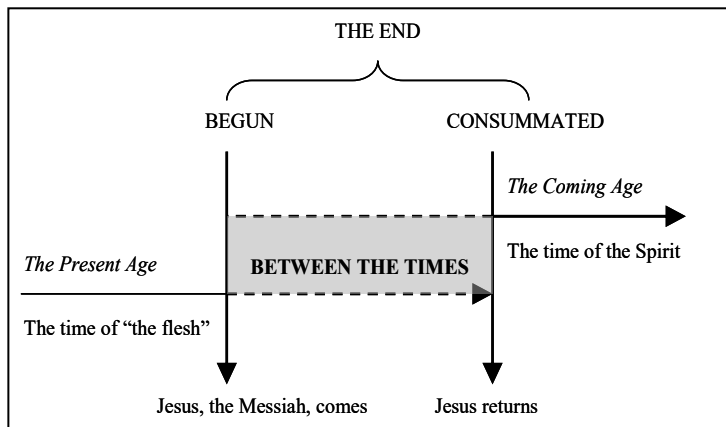


Figure 2. The Christians' new perspective: already/not yet

Yes, Jesus was the Messiah. Yes, God's kingdom had come -- but not yet in all its fullness! The time of renewal had begun with the Messiah's coming but the consummation of this transformation would await his return. The

Christians came to understand that they lived "between times" when God's kingdom had come *already*, but *not yet*. I really can't overemphasize how important to our reading of the NT is our understanding of this "already/not yet" perspective. When Paul writes that Christians are the ones on whom the "ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor 10:11), he means exactly that! This framework determined everything about the early Christians – how they lived, how they thought, what they wrote, how they worshipped . . . everything. The new order had begun. They were new creations (2 Cor 5:17). They were now the people of the Spirit. . . and, truly, so are we!

As Gordon Fee writes, we are empowered by God's Spirit to live the life of the future, of God's kingdom, in the present age. We are to be, in Paul's phrase, "ambassadors for Christ," carrying God's message of reconciliation and hope to the world, in what we do and say every day. We are new creations not just for our own sakes but for the sake of all the world. Paul understood that in his journeys he was crisscrossing the Mediterranean founding colonies of a new human race, a people born from above, born of the Spirit (John 3). St. Andrew is just such a colony. It can be hard for us to think of ourselves this way . . . but that is the nature of transformation. It may take the butterfly awhile to comprehend its own rebirth. We may not always feel like new creations. We certainly don't always act like new creations. But we are. *This is the real world.*

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *1 Thessalonians*

No class on December 26

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *A Brief History of Christmas*

We begin 1 Samuel on January 3. Join us!

No class on December 27

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC". [Note – I'm having a lot of problems with "junk content blocking" of my Tuesday class. So, the most reliable way to hear the class is on the podcast, at scottengle.podbean.com.)]

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class. [Note – I'm having a lot of problems with "junk content blocking" of my Tuesday class. So, the most reliable way to hear the class is on the podcast, at scottengle.podbean.com.)]