

Pastor Roy's sermon from January 22, 2017

Children: Who are you? What is your name? Do you have another name? What are you good at? What do you really like to do? These are your gifts and you will always be able to do things uniquely well because you are you. You are a gift to this world. This is true for everyone and everything alive—no exceptions.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. What does that mean? What is Jesus proclaiming? Today's Isaiah reading tells of folks coming into the light, finding the glory of God, knowing joy and hope. The rod of the oppressor has been broken. There is celebration in Zion, in God's country.

For Isaiah, the reign of God is about freedom, life and joy. The reign of God is about hospitality and hope. For Isaiah justice is not about people keeping what they want to be theirs, but in people learning to share in a just fashion, opening opportunity to those who have no privilege, less opportunity, not enough. In contemporary words, the reign of God is not about getting more for the middle class, the reign of God brings new, sensible abundance to the poor and disenfranchised. The rod of the oppressor has been broken in the reign of God. This is the language of the Old Testament prophets. This is the language of Jesus and Paul and the saints.

Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near means change. It means things are routinely shaken up. It means that even treasured institutions will be replaced. Plans will be undone. The bows of the mighty will be broken and the feeble will gird on strength. The poor will be lifted from the dust —1 Samuel 2, Hannah's prayer. And from Mary's prayer, he has brought down the powerful from their thrones and the lowly he has lifted up. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near is a question. On which side of the Kingdom of God, reign of Christ, do you wish to live? Do I wish to be on the side of compassionate love and real mercy which takes chances. . .or on the side of white knuckled security of my own investments, whatever and wherever they may be? Am I living for love and compassion or fear of not enough or being taken advantage of?

The source of our repentance, this reign of God must come love and mercy. We choose from a place of joy not from a place of duty or command.

We have the opportunity, the chance to share or to cling. One brings joy, one brings profound sorrow and brokenness.

We choose our destiny one decision, one moment, one person at a time. Freedom comes with a high price. It is the joyous price of love.

We serve a God who breaks the rod of the oppressor with love. May we struggle with all our energy to serve rather than oppress. It's not easy and it will always be a struggle to know on which side of the fence we stand. But joy is only known by those in the struggle. Joy is not exuberant, selfish happiness. Joy is knowing that you are struggling on the side of justice and peace, on the side of the reign of Christ.

The reign of God in the prophets and in the gospels is a struggle for justice and mercy. It is to help those who need help. It is to weep with those who weep. To listen to those who are ignored, it is to be listening to the voice of the Spirit calling us to hope.

The reign of God is shared sacrifice leading to joy by the way of love and mercy.

How is the reign of God near you and me today? Will we keep repenting, leave behind the stuff that holds us back, and release ourselves into the loving mercy of God at work in our world today? Amen. To speak even more bluntly, some believe that Donald Trump will throw off oppressive government structures so that the economic vibrancy of the 50s and 60s can be restored. Others fear that he will establish an oppressive government over those who are vulnerable, women, minority ethnic groups and minority religious groups. Who is being oppressed in this country? Is it those who fear they are losing their power? Or those who had very little power to begin with?

Those of us who are in our comfortable places aren't sure we understand or care. We give lip service one way or another, but really, we are comfortable with things as they are and don't need anything to change, so we dig in our heels.

Does it feel as though the reign of God has come near to you, for you? How so?

We must keep in mind that the reign of God is not something good for me which is bad for someone else. It is not my freedom at the expense of someone else's freedom. It cannot be pinning the blame and the price on someone else so that they will fail because I can succeed.

I'm not saying the reign of God is easy and requires no sacrifice. I'm saying that my hope should never place another in despair economically or politically. My good news should not be another person's bad news.

Clearly the reign of God is not about everyone getting everything on their wish list. Jesus made sacrifices, Isaiah knew the keen edge of sacrifice, sacrifice must be shared all the way around. I'm not saying that the kingdom is about the fulfillment of an individual's unrealistic expectations and fears. The Kingdom, or reign of God will not directly make another person suffer, but will bring relief and freedom and hope to all. Shared sacrifice rather than a promise of privileged status. I hear Jesus and Isaiah saying that the reign of God is about releasing privileged status in exchange for equality and justice for all.

The reign of God is not simplistic. The reign of God is not about politics and should not be expected to follow political lines, expectations, or demands. And yet we are always tempted to think that God and God's priorities fit perfectly with ours and our politics. The political realm is important, yes. But politics is often more about power and influence and overstated rhetoric than about truth or mercy or sacrificial love.

*How has the reign of God come near to you? How has the salvation of God brought you hope? How has this congregation over the years brought light and joy—the reign of God to our neighbors near and far? If you are honest you might be tempted to say, “the reign of God has not come near to me.” Or I don't know what the salvation of God is.

Just as you are a child of God and you are gifted by the Holy Spirit, the kingdom of God, the reign of God is within you. If you don't feel the Spirit, perhaps you are looking for the wrong thing. Do you feel love? Do you feel mercy? Do you long for the entire creation to be filled with hope and peace? Do you sometimes take chances to be merciful, to practice hope? I know you do because I see it in you!

Oh sure, we all have negative thoughts. We all have temptations, we all think and say discouraging things about others, and about God's mercy. We all are tired, and weary, and frustrated at the snail's pace of justice and helpfulness and kindness within ourselves and within our world. Sometimes we are afraid that there is not enough love to go around. That we will disappoint God or that God will disappoint us!

As a congregations we are tempted to focus on finances because our building and salaries require more money than we bring in weekly and we know this is unsustainable. But the reign of God does not necessarily come to us through our building and salaries. The reign of God is much more personal. Your being and doing bring the reign of God to those around you. We participate in the reign of God and the reign of God is much bigger than us. We are conduits! We invite others by love, by mercy, by sacrifice, by joy to experience the reign of God—the nearness of God.

Isaiah—No gloom for those who were in anguish. Not contempt, only glory. Those who walked in darkness have seen a great light. On those in deep darkness, light has shined. There is great joy for the rod of the oppressor has been broken.