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An Alternative Whisper  
Duke Chapel  
February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2011  
Isaiah 49: 8-16a/Matthew 6:24-34  
Rev. Dr. Trygve David Johnson

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I. Iconic Invitation

*Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be given to you as well.* (Matthew 6:33) It's an iconic verse. Iconic verses, like this one, are those we memorize early and recite late in life. They are the kind of verse gets inside of us, so it can whisper to us again and again, the wisdom of alternative reality. Like our favorite song, we never grow tired of singing their chorus. *And god said let there be light; and there was light (Gen. 1:3); The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, (Psalm 23:1); Have mercy on me O God, According to your steadfast love. (Psalm 51:1); Nothing shall separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:39); Seek First the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:33)*

There is, of course, a danger to an iconic verse like these. The words become so common we don't allow their dramatic claims to shock or surprise us. We put them on refrigerator magnets next to the family photo's, the grocery lists, and the phone numbers of the pharmacists and the doctors. The danger is that when we become so familiar with the photo's on the fridge, we don't even see the magnets or its message, and in our daily routines we become inoculated to their promises – and we forget a truth so fundamental it is to put our own soul in peril.

So we have to work at going back to these verses them with a kind of second naiveté. These iconic verses are like a bush that burns and is never consumed; their wisdom is never exhausted and their light never grows dim. We need to whisper them to ourselves, under our breath because like a compass they orient us toward the direction of another country – whose sovereignty is so expansive that it invites our lives to explore the geography of the wide-open country of salvation. That is what these verses are: they are invitation to something beautiful.

*Seek First the Kingdom of God...* This is Jesus unsettling invitation – whispered into the ear of the world - that if accepted has the beauty to power to drill down to the water-table of the soul, that when touched, stirs the unnamed longings that causes the soul to tremble. It is an invitation that exposes us to a truth so consequential that it demands that we think on it “by day and by night, every day, for years, ever stronger and deeper.”<sup>1</sup>

*Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all this shall be given to you....*It is an invitation that makes a shocking promise. It promises a life of freedom from worry and anxiety. It is an invitation that promises a new life of communion with God. It is God's invitation whispered to a world locked inside the citadel of its own design. *Seek First the*

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<sup>1</sup> Czeslaw Milosz, “Either/Or” in *New and Collected Poems, 1931-2001* (New York: Ecco, 2003), 540.

*Kingdom of God* is the key, that if accepted, unlocks us from our prisons and launches us into the wide-open Kingdom of a beloved son; a kingdom where the streets have no name...but where every street is raised up and leads to a King whose reign of reconciliation reaches everywhere, and everyone, at all times.

*Seek First the Kingdom of God...and all these things...shall be given to you.* Here we need to pause. For is an invitation that inherently suggests there are other invitations vying for our attention. To seek this first this Kingdom, means we can't seek out other ones. Jesus knows there are other Kingdoms that call for our primary allegiance. Which is why I imagine Jesus invitation to seek the expansive Kingdom of God, comes on the heels of warnings that expose our captive imaginations, desires, and loyalties. Before Jesus invites us to seek the Kingdom he first says...*No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted and despise the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. Therefore do not worry about your life – what you will eat, or drink, or about your body what you will wear? Is life not more than food and the body more than clothing?...look at the birds...look at the fields of lilies...don't worry...you of little faith...don't worry about tomorrow!*

## II. First Memory

I can't read these warnings and not my first memory of Church and my first serious lesson of God. *Come with me.* I'm three and half years old. My family just moved to a small town Whidbey Island. My Dad just got a new job as a manager of a bank. I remember going with parents to a white clapboard Presbyterian Church. I remember there being lots and lots of steps that steeped into the sanctuary. I remember the pews looking dark, and the smell of dried pinesall, and fuzzy light pressing through stained glass. "So this is church," I thought. I remember thinking that this place was important. This is where God lived.

What I remember most clearly is my mom giving me a dollar. For a three year old, in 1976, a dollar is a big deal. I started to like church. I don't know if I had ever held money before. I liked it. I remember how it felt. Crisp. Clean. Holding it I felt important. I liked the feeling. My Mother gave me the paper dollar and said, when the times comes I'll tell you what to do with it. Well I know what I wanted to do with it. I wanted to keep it. It was mine. Holding it I could hear a voice whispering inside me: "It's mine."

I remember sitting in the sanctuary. I remember singing. I don't remember the sermon. I do remember the shiny bronze plate with the red felt bottom coming my way. It was passed sideways down the pew – right to left - person to person – and when it got to me – the plate stopped. My Mom whispered, 'put the dollar in the plate'. I looked at her. My confused innocence quickly turned to a shrewd defiance. I shook my head. Nooo. She said put it in. I said, in a loud voice that called attention to the new young family, "it's mine!"

My mom said, "It's not yours," she said. "It's God's." I remember releasing my greedy grasp and letting the dollar go into to the offering. I remember watching the plate, and my dollar disappear down the pew. That was my first lesson in Christian theology: "it's not mine. It's God's." God and I weren't getting off to a very good start. He just stole my only dollar.

Well I remember the next week rolled around. Mom did not give me a dollar. Our family sat in our pew. I kept thinking about my dollar. “What happened to it? Where did it go? Did it miss me?” The service was the same routine. We sang. We listened. We sat. Then it came time for the offering. And the bronze plate with the red felt bottom was passed around the church – sideways down the pew – person to person – until it came to me. And something miraculous happened. I tell you it was like the Red Sea parting, or Jesus walking on water. It was a miracle. There it was – at the bottom of bronze plate with the red-felt bottom was *my* dollar – just where I left it last week. I jumped up on the pew, grabbed the dollar bill out of the plate – help it up like I had won a prize and publicly testified – “My dollar! God gave it back!” Thus began my illustrious life as a preacher. For some reason, shortly after that, we never went back to that Presbyterian Church.

### III. Two Kingdoms

“It’s my dollar.” I didn’t know it at the time, but I was paraphrasing the a dominant philosophy and economy theory of another Kingdom “It’s my dollar.” It was as if already, at the age of three, I had doubts that God would or could provide. By natural instinct, I presumed a Kingdom of scarcity. I grasped the dollar out of the offering plate because, deep down I thought there might not be enough to go around. I can’t help but think that maybe the reason we are in the mess we are in is that a lot of other people failed to listen to their mothers in church and thought those dollars were theirs.

You see I think my mom was trying to teach me what Jesus was trying to teaching that afternoon on the hillside overlooking the see of Galilee. A truth so fundamental that to ignore is to put our soul in peril. The truth is not about money. Nor is it about clothes or food. It’s not even about our life. It’s more fundamental.

It is a truth about God.  
A truth about what God has done, is doing, and is still yet to do!  
God can be trusted to provide!

By giving my away my dollar my mom was trying to teach me what was so fundamental to Jesus: The Kingdom of God cannot be grasped; it can only be received as a gift.

To receive this gift is to be given the gift to see reality with new eyes. Jesus invites us into an alternative imagination, which is God’s imagination. This imagination wagers that the Kingdom of God is a kingdom of abundance that transcends our presumed limits. Jesus whispers, this Kingdom of God is the real world and the kingdom of scarcity is a lie we presume; the vision of scarcity is a consequence of our turning away from God – that demands of us that we buy stock in a system that pays empty dividends. The Kingdom of Scarcity is a myth that God’s creation can’t take care of us – that the creator helps only those who help themselves – so we worry and we hedge our bets.

Jesus whispers, “*Seek First the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be given to you,*” and with a whisper Jesus shatters our perceived reality. Jesus whispers to us an alternative Kingdom that promises God’s Kingdom is generative – that God speaks, God gives, God creates, and God blesses; Jesus invitation whispers that the God of Israel is the

condition and the consequence that leads to life. So don't worry! Don't be anxious! God can be trusted. Practice Faith.

Jesus knows that when we listen to the voice of scarcity, faith in God is reduced. A reduced God leads to reduced life. He asks: *Is life not more than food, and the body more than clothing?* Jesus sees the same circumstances we do. He can do the math. Yet Jesus sees another reality that is pressing upon this one. Where we see a mountain, Jesus sees a highway. Where we see a bird, Jesus sees God's providential care; Where we see fields of lilies, Jesus sees a world "charged with the grandeur of God...a world where there lives the dearest freshness in the deep down things."<sup>2</sup>

#### IV. Jesus is the Kingdom

How does Jesus see this? I think the answer may have to do with who Jesus is. It would be a mistake of history to reduce Jesus to a spiritual sage, or the voice of an ancient moral prophet – dispensing pithy sayings like candy from a Pez-Dispenser. No. The voice we hear this morning is the whisper of the *invisible God, the first born over all creation. For in him all things came into being, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers, all things came into being through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body the church; he is the first born from the dead, so that he might come to have first place among everything. For in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile all things, on earth and in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.* (Col. 1:15-20)

Jesus sees another reality because he is the source of reality. Where our vision is near sighted by the logic of our doubt, Jesus sees far into the horizon of "a glory yet to be fully revealed" (Rom. 8:18) – a glory made possible by a cross that has put the world to rights. When Jesus shows up, so does the Kingdom of God, and when the Kingdom shows up reality is reordered – reoriented – rediscovered - as the myth of scarcity gives way to the reality of God's abundance. Jesus looks around and sees God providing, because he knows the long history of God – is a holy history – where God's takes conditions that are scarce, and uses these circumstances to show us nature of abundance:

Out of nothing, God whispers :

    "let there be light...and there is light.

        Put flesh on these dry bones.

            Give victory through five through stones.

                Receive water from a rock.

                    Feed the masses with five loaves & two fish

                        Save the world by making peace

                            through the blood of the cross.

Over and over this is what God does. God makes the impossible a possibility. God takes scarcity and transforms it into abundance This is why the Prophet cries out: *"Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his People, and will have compassion on his suffering ones."* (Isaiah 49:13)

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<sup>2</sup> See Gerhard Manley Hopkins poem, "God's Grandeur".

So Jesus whispers, "*Seek first the Kingdom of God...*" When we do something happens! God's kingdom shatters our perceived realities and pushes us out of the presumed world in which most of us are trapped and so desperately want to leave. But we have to lean in and tune our ear to hear its alternative whisper.

The Kingdom of Scarcity says

Our marriage cannot endure the darkness...

The Kingdom of God whispers there is a light that shines in the darkness  
and the darkness cannot overcome it. (John 1:5)

The Kingdom of Scarcity announces

"God has abandoned you."

The Kingdom of God whispers

"The Lord is my Shepard, I shall not want." (Psalm 23:1)

The Kingdom of Scarcity proclaims

"There are not hours in the day."

The Kingdom of God whispers

"Come to me, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28)

Where Kingdom of Scarcity laments,

"you don't have enough money..."

Kingdom of God whispers

"My cup overflows..." (Psalm 23:5)

The kingdom of scarcity screams

"No one loves you...you will be alone forever..."

The Kingdom of God whispers gently,

"Nothing shall separate you from the love of God." (Romans 8:39)

The Kingdom of Scarcity shouts

"you are not thin enough...certainly not smart enough..."

The Kingdom of Abundance whispers

"You are God's beloved..." (Romans 1:7)

The Kingdom of Scarcity yells

"God has forsaken me!"

The Kingdom of God whispers

"I have inscribed you,  
on the palm of my hands." (Isaiah 49:16)

The Kingdom of Scarcity swears

"There is not enough to feed us!"

The Kingdom of God says,

"I am the bread of life." (John 6:35)

The Kingdom of Scarcity scoffs

"God cannot be trusted."

The Kingdom of God whispers  
“You of little faith.” (Mat. 6:30)

The Kingdom of God, over and over, is a voice whispering of God’s alternative reality of abundance. So *Seek First the Kingdom of God*. This is the refrain I need to grove into my soul like music pressed into fine vinyl. I need to play it again and again when I am tempted to listen to music of another Kingdom. It reminds me that I don’t have to first seek my Kingdom to get what I most need and desire. It reminds me God does not throw me back onto myself. I don’t have to grasp money out of God’s offering plate anymore.

*Seek First the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be given to you.* This is a shocking claim. How can we possibly trust such a promise? How can this claim possibly be true? We Look around. We do the math. We are reasonable and rationale. Where is the proof this Kingdom even exists?

It is Jesus. He is the “image of the invisible God.” (Col. 1:15) Jesus is the proof this Kingdom exists and can be sought. Jesus brings forth the gift of the Kingdom of God, because he is the Kingdom. The gift is never separated from the gift giver. Jesus is the righteousness of God we seek. The Kingdom of God cannot be reduced to an ethical path, or an exercise of self-actualization. The unsettling good-news, that when received causes the soul to tremble, is that we can seek first the Kingdom of God, because in Christ, God’s Kingdom has first sought us. Though we turned our face away from God, God, in Christ, has turned his face toward us; though we fled into the far country where faith is scarce, God pursues us even here, into *the wasteland*, in order to draw us back into the world of God’s abundance – a world where Jesus is not only the way, he is also our destination.

## V. The Table still Whispers

*Seek First the Kingdom of God* is Jesus invitation to re-imagine our expectations and re-calibrate our hopes. *Seek First the Kingdom of God* suggests “there is more, much more, more than we can possibly see or imagine.” *Seek First the Kingdom of God* is Jesus invitation into a communion that has the power to re-discover the life we have lost in living. It is a communion so beautiful it disrupts our sleep and haunts our waking life. This communion can never be bought, or sold; nor can it be coerced or quantified; it cannot be manipulated nor maneuvered. This communion can only be received as a gift.

Where do we learn to receive and unwrap this gift? Where can we go to experience that God can be trusted? Where do we learn to train our eyes to see this world Jesus promises to give?

If you are wondering can I trust God? Can I trust wager my life on this promise? Then there is a place we can go.

Here. I think we come here. Here in the deep waters of baptism we find our find our passports stamped with the seal of the commonwealth of saints. Here at the table of abundance we come face to face with the truth so unsettling that to ignore it may allow us to gain the world, but lose our very soul - the truth that the Kingdom of God can be sought because, Jesus is among us and is still whispering to us an invitation to relocate our life in God’s alternative Kingdom.

Here, at this table, in this sanctuary, right now, Jesus whispers a truth so softly it is barely heard at all:

“you don’t need to grasp...

You need not worry anymore...

There is enough...

Here...at my table...

there is always enough”

Amen.