

DAY 3 | LUKE 4

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Transforming Our World

by Timothy Gillespie

The San Diego fireworks show in California, USA is among the most impressive in the world and attracts thousands of people. Last year's show has been described, from all accounts, as epic. I have seen video of it; if you haven't, you should check it out. It was, apparently, a computer glitch that sent three of the four barges filled with fireworks to blow up their cargo in a span of about nine seconds. The video is stunning; three barges with all of their fireworks going up at once.

Waiting for the Something



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I suppose the thing that is more interesting to me than the fireworks explosions was the fact that the crowds hung around for 35-45 minutes until a voice came over a loudspeaker and basically said, "Um, that's it folks, sorry."

People were waiting for more. They were waiting for the purple shimmering fireworks that turn to white and silver. They were waiting for the red, white, and blue fireworks that would make them remember their childhood—and create childhood memories for their kids. They were waiting for the finale.

You know how it is when you are younger—you keep asking whether or not that was the finale, and your parent would answer, "not yet, just wait." And you

couldn't wait! You just wanted to see the finale. When it came, you knew. When it showed up, you were aware that this was different, this was worthwhile, this was what you had been waiting for.

But for those poor people in San Diego, they experienced the beginning, middle, and end of a fireworks experience—in nine short seconds! And then they were left waiting for a finale that would never come. They were just left waiting, expectantly, for an end.

The press covered the story with words like, “disappointed” and “bored” in the waiting for the finale that had already happened.

It's a shame really, that they couldn't have used that time for something else. The aggregate of all those minutes and seconds from all of those people could have literally changed the world if they had been put to good use. But they were just waiting for the finale.

We just recently returned from the Northern New England Camp Meeting; a great place, with great people. It was a great experience; four wonderful people were baptized in the Youth and Young Adult division, and we got to hang out in one of the earliest places of history for our denomination. It was great and I am grateful for the opportunity!

As we got to the airport in Boston, we learned something heart-wrenching: Our plane had been delayed! Now, this would not probably bother most people, but I have three children, and their various devices were about out of battery power. Bad times indeed. The boys kept getting in trouble. They kept getting into everything around them. They were not at all doing well; and, by the virtue of *that* fact, neither was I!

It seemed as if we would never leave. For every five minutes that the plane was delayed, it felt like another hour we had to wait. The boys were in trouble, they were bored, I was mad, and so was my wife.

The point is this; when you are just waiting around, it not only makes the time pass slowly, but it also leaves you a lot of time to get in trouble.

A Great Disappointment

Why do I say all of this? Because we are a people who have experienced a great disappointment. However, our hearts are still longing for this blessed hope that burns within our hearts; hope in the coming of the Lord. And in the time of waiting we are keeping our robes clean, as best we can.

Some of us have this idea that the reason that Jesus came was simply to save us from our sins and, when the time is right, take us to heaven. However, let's look at the words of Jesus and see what He believed was the reason for His coming:

"He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me **to proclaim good news to the poor.**

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind,

to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, **"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing"** (Luke 4:16-21, emphasis added).

What was Jesus saying? Was it possible that He was saying that justice, peace, and righteousness were about to be established forever?

His answer: YES!

Breaking Down the Text

And we know that with Jesus we don't see a way around the very bold statement that He makes. There are no loopholes, no sidestepping. If you are like me, you like to make a solid argument, and then make sure you have given yourself an out, a loophole, a small back door so that if someone else has a better argument, then there is always a way to "save face."

Jesus, however, left no such room. The time of justice, peace, and reconciliation was now upon us, as He had ushered it in with His life, death, and resurrection. It was clear that it was not simply or only for saving us personally, but also to declare the good news to the poor.

But let's stop for one moment, and ask the question: "What is good news for the poor?" Is good news for the poor that once you leave this wretched life the next thing you will see is Jesus Christ and journey to heaven?

Absolutely! That will always be good news, for the rich, poor, ultra poor, ultra rich, and the middle class as well. Do you know what else is good news to the poor? Food, clothing, drink, shelter. These things create in us the ability to continue on.

Sometimes, good news is what can immediately alleviate a situation. Is our good news to the poor something that changes their station in life? Helps them live life in the current kingdom of God? Is our good news only the news of the future, or is it good news for today as well?

The government under which Jesus lived was corrupt and oppressive; on every hand were crying abuses--extortion, intolerance, and grinding cruelty. Yet the Saviour attempted no civil reforms. He attacked no national abuses, nor condemned the national enemies. He did not interfere with the authority or administration of those in power. He who was our example kept aloof from earthly governments. Not because He was indifferent to the woes of men, but because the remedy did not lie in merely human and external measures. To be efficient, the cure must reach men individually, and must regenerate the heart (Ellen G. White: *God's Amazing Grace*, page 16.2).

Does our good news only take the form of a tract or a book, or does it take the form of clothing or bread? Because I know what I need when I'm hungry—and I mean when I am physically hungry—so do you.

By kneeling down with bowl and towel, Jesus redefined greatness.

By proclaiming the good news, and then making it practical, He reclaimed the good news for the present kingdom of God. And we needed this redefinition desperately. "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17). The children of Israel had become a poor preview of the coming kingdom of God.

On television and in media, we make choices based on the previews that we see for a show, a series, or a media event. By going to Apple trailers you can see what is on the horizon and what is currently happening in media experience and productions. But sometimes, the previews of what we see make us completely uninterested in spending our time watching whatever is offered.

There are other times when the converse is true, when the preview far exceeds the experience. We watch a preview on television for a new series and the two minutes we see makes us want the experience. Then, when we watch it, we realize that there were only two minutes worth watching anyway.

Up until Jesus had come, the preview for the kingdom of God was pretty poor. The children of Israel had not given the world an expression of the character of God that many were interested in. The trailer wasn't making anyone want to see the movie. For how they defined greatness was by the mere fact that they were the chosen people along with the "Law," their tradition and heritage. Poverty and affliction were signs of divine disapproval; this was hardly good news for the poor and afflicted; the law wasn't even good news to those who were striving to keep it without recourse to the Savior, because the law convicts and points out sin.

So here we have a world desperately in need of good news, and we have a Jesus who ushers in that good news in more than simple words. The good news of Jesus went beyond theological argument and became particular. It became enfleshed.

The good news had skin on it, and had bread in it, and clothing, and drink. The good news became physical healing and the good news became a community that told everything, shared everything, and made sure no one who was around would be hungry, cold, or afflicted if at all possible.

The good news of heaven became the good news today, in their lives, in their everyday, waking up and walking around lives. It was not merely projected to the realm of “someday soon”; it was TODAY. Today was the day that the good news of justice, peace, sight, and freedom were proclaimed. “Someday soon,” we will experience the culmination of all our hopes and dreams in the establishment of the glorious and eternal kingdom of God; heaven starts in the here and now.

The King and the Kingdom

I start to get excited, because when the good news is real and present you can't help but be excited. I think it was one of the reasons that the disciples didn't fast when they were around Jesus. They knew that there was too much good news to be stoic any longer.

But this good news was hard for the good, churchy folk to stomach. It was too much and seemed too foreign. It was too inclusive and meant that they had to love the unlovable.

You see, at this point, God was tired of righteous acts. Their assemblies had become pageants and their worship was something that God was awfully tired of consuming. This had happened before—let's read in Isaiah 1:10-17 (despite appearances, he's speaking to Jerusalem!):

“Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah!

"The multitude of your sacrifices— what are they to me?" says the LORD.
"I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals;
I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts?
Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me.
New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your worthless assemblies.
Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong.
Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed.
Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow."

And again in Isaiah 58:1-10:

"Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet.
Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins.
For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God.
They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them.
'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it?
Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'
Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves?
Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?
**"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?
Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?
Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.**

Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

“If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and **if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed**, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.”

This is God calling good church people out! He wanted more than their pageants, their offerings, their songs, and their worship. He wanted their lives to reflect His love tangibly, with skin, with compassion, in real and powerful ways.

LOVE MORE, is always the cry of the LORD to His people.

He’s not pretending anymore. We see in 1 John 3:16-18 the function of the church:

“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. **If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.**”

It is always hard when Jesus defines something, because He defines it in such a different way. We often think we know what Jesus was going to say. But He rarely said what people thought He would say.

Basically, Jesus was saying that following Christ was to be **downwardly mobile in an upwardly mobile world.**

The good news means a new set of values, a new trajectory, a new focus, a new orientation, and a new lifestyle. The good news of the tangible kingdom of God is not a spiritual discipline that we practice, but a new way of orienting one’s entire life.

As an orienteering illustration, think about finding one’s compass points in life. When you surf, you do this with a point on the shore; sailing, a point on the horizon; orienteering, a point on the map. What is your orientation point when it comes to your faith journey?

It is important that your point of reference, when it comes to the kingdom of God, be tangible. It needs to be something with skin on it. This is why Christian service, or the ability to serve one another without thought of any return, is so paramount to a healthy life of faith in the kingdom of God. To ignore the greater works of compassion is to literally lose our way; it is to see the kingdom of God like that fireworks show, where it all happens in the first nine seconds, and now you are just waiting for the finale. It's to be bored in the kingdom of God, and that makes no sense!

The good news means that we are to believe that there is a kingdom and that that kingdom has a king.

Let me explain what I mean:

For many Christians, there seems to be this misconception that the journey of Jesus to earth was to simply save us. But, as we saw in the texts already quoted, He came for more than simply spiritual salvation, but to create a new economy based on kingdom of God principles. Ellen White describes the launching of Jesus' earthly ministry recorded in Luke 4:18-21 as follows:

He (Jesus) stood before the people as a living expositor of the prophecies concerning Himself. Explaining the words He had read, He spoke of the Messiah as a reliever of the oppressed, a liberator of captives, a healer of the afflicted, restoring sight to the blind, and revealing to the world the light of truth. His impressive manner and the wonderful import of His words thrilled the hearers with a power they had never felt before. The tide of divine influence broke every barrier down; like Moses, they beheld the Invisible. As their hearts were moved upon by the Holy Spirit, they responded with fervent amens and praises to the Lord. (DA 237.2)

And over the years, too often communities have lost this sense of mission, and have fallen into an expression of Jesus that is based on intellectual beliefs, rather than compassion. But the kingdom of God is a kingdom of compassion. It has always been and always will be.

James says it clearly: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (1:27).

A kingdom of compassion is what we are asked to live in—and to express. To do this means we must embrace the kingdom economy, the kingdom way of life, and this is a beautiful thing.

There are many who believe in kingdom compassion and work actively in it; however, many of them refuse to acknowledge that this kingdom has a king. And this is where Christianity has the opportunity to be more than simply a good way to live, or a system of compassion to the world.

At our best, we believe in the kingdom and acknowledge and worship its king.

However, too often the case becomes that Christians begin their faith journey by acknowledging the King, but refuse to participate in His kingdom. They have accepted the explosion of grace in their lives, but are never able to make their faith tangible. They have accepted Jesus as a Savior, but deny Him as Lord. They are baptized in water for the cleansing of past sins, dying to their past life, but are not resurrected through the power of the Holy Spirit into the new kingdom life in Christ.

Accepting Jesus as Savior and denying Him as Lord leaves many believers with nothing to do, nowhere to go, and they take their time fixing other people's sins in the church.

Oh, if we could only put that energy into being the tangible hands of Christ in the world.

One of the most powerful ways to overcome a religion that is relegated to the philosophical is to get involved in a religion that is tangible.

Two stories illustrate this point well.

I read an email story this week about a group of salesmen who attended a convention out-of-town some years back. As they rushed through the terminal to get to their departing flight, one of them accidentally knocked over a table that held a display of apples.

They continued running for their plane as apples flew everywhere and rolled along the ground. They made it just in time to get on their plane. One of them felt a

twinge of compassion for the girl whose apple stand they had knocked over, and told his buddies to go on without him and to tell his wife he would be taking a later flight.

Then he returned to the terminal where the apples were all over the terminal floor. He was glad he did. The 16-year-old girl was totally blind! She was crying, tears running down her cheeks in frustration, and at the same time helplessly groping for her spilled produce as the crowd swirled about her, no one stopping and no one caring for her plight.

The salesman knelt on the floor with her, gathered up the apples, put them back on the table and helped organize her display. As he did this, he noticed that many of the apples had become battered and bruised, so he put those aside in another basket. When he had finished, he pulled out his wallet and said to the girl, "Here, please take this \$40 for the damage we did. Are you okay?"

The girl nodded through her tears. He continued on, "I hope we didn't spoil your day too badly." As the salesman started to walk away, the bewildered blind girl called out to him, "Mister..."

He paused and turned to look back into those blind eyes.

"Are you Jesus?" she said.

He stopped in mid-stride and he wondered. Then slowly he made his way to the later flight with that question burning in his soul: "Are you Jesus?"

Another story

Abraham Lincoln went to a slave market one time, and was moved with compassion to place a bid on a young black girl. He won the bid and walked away with his "property." There was a sullen, angry expression on the girl's face, because she knew that here was another white man who had bought her and would abuse her. As they walked away from the slave block, however, Lincoln told the girl, "You are free."

“What does that mean?” she demanded.

“It means, you are free.”

“Does that mean that I can be what I want to be?”

“Yes--you can be whatever you want to be.”

“Does that mean that I can say what I want to say?”

“Yes--you can say whatever you want to say.”

“Does that mean that I can go where I want to go?”

“Yes--you can go wherever you want to go.”

“Then ...” said the girl, “I’ll go with you.”

I read this second story to illustrate a further point. When you meet Jesus, you stay with Jesus.

We have too often thought that our **orthodoxy** (our right belief) was somehow living in the kingdom of God. But we have, too often, forgotten that our **orthopraxy** (our right action) is what we do in the kingdom of God.

Has our faith become like that of those people in San Diego, waiting for the finale, bored, disappointed, and without movement—waiting for the Second Coming without thought to those around us who are hurting?

For Seventh-day Adventists, there is a King, and He has a kingdom.

It is not the church’s job to do the service for you, but to facilitate opportunities for you to get involved.

Regardless of your passion, your church should help you live it!

Ministering in your passion is a huge part of living in the kingdom of God.

The worship service should be a time to come and celebrate the God moments that we have had as we witness and serve the greater community.

But for far too long, church attendance has been the spiritual high point of our week; great words are spoken, great music leads to the presence of God, but often there is too little or no time to express our gratitude for what God has been leading us to discover and do in our kingdom living all week, all month, all year, every second of every day.

But if we sit and do nothing, God will grow weary of our assemblies.

Unamuno, the Spanish philosopher, tells about the Roman aqueduct at Segovia, in his native Spain. It was built in A.D. 109. For eighteen hundred years, it carried cool water from the mountains to the hot and thirsty city. Nearly sixty generations of men drank from its flow. Then came another generation, a recent one, who said, "This aqueduct is so great a marvel that it ought to be preserved for our children, as a museum piece. We shall relieve it of its centuries-long labor."

They did; they laid modern iron pipes. They gave the ancient bricks and mortar a reverent rest. And the aqueduct began to fall apart. The sun beating on the dry mortar caused it to crumble. The bricks and stone sagged and threatened to fall. What ages of service could not destroy, idleness disintegrated.

And this is what can become of a church that does not invest in the service of others.

"The great violinist, Nicolo Paganini, willed his marvelous violin to Genoa -- the city of his birth -- but only on the condition that the instrument never be played upon. It was an unfortunate condition, for it is a peculiarity of wood that as long as it is used and handled, it shows little wear. As soon as it is discarded, it begins to decay. The exquisite, mellow-toned violin has become worm-eaten in its beautiful case, valueless except as a relic. The moldering instrument is a reminder that a life withdrawn from all service to others loses its meaning" (*Bits & Pieces*, June 25, 1992).

So this is the truth: there is a kingdom, and that kingdom does have a King. And that King, in Luke 4, made it very clear what He was about. It makes sense that we be about the things that Jesus was about: mercy, justice, compassion, favor, and healing. If our faith communities show these characteristics, they will not only be full—they will be overflowing. ●



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