

The Kingdom Inaugurated

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What are you most afraid of? How does fear drive your life?

Recently, the world witnessed the inauguration of the 45th president of the United States of America. An inauguration is an ostentatious event with a great deal of time and money spent on recognizing the peaceful transition of power from one leader and his administration to another.

The mandate for the current administration is to "Make America Great Again."

But there is a tremendous amount of fear circulating in the States right now. So many people in my sphere of influence are scared to death about what the president will do or say. They're afraid of what will happen to health care. They're afraid of how he'll interact with other nations. They're afraid of what he'll do to "Make America Great Again."

So much fear.

I don't want to denigrate the president, but no matter how much the economy grows, or how safe the streets become, or how much strength the nation projects, there's still the problem of evil.

And we've been battling it for a long time.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made.

He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself" (Genesis 3:1-10, ESV).

"I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid..."

Pause for just a moment and imagine this familiar scene. Try to picture, as much as our minds can comprehend, what it must have been like for God to walk within creation, and have

that kind of relationship with Adam and Eve. The author made the effort to describe God in relational terms, coming down to where Adam was and meeting with him personally.

Now, hear the contrast he drew between the picture of God walking in the Garden, and Adam cowering in fear behind some nameless tree. We know from the text that Adam was afraid, and he admitted he hid himself because he was naked, but what was it about God that was so frightening, or his being naked that was so suddenly terrifying?

Listen in on the conversation as God began to question the serpent, Eve and Adam. Listen as each one of them blamed someone else for their failure. Listen to the consequences of their mistakes.

And to Adam he said,

“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife
and have eaten of the tree
of which I commanded you,
‘You shall not eat of it,’
cursed is the ground because of you;
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust,
and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:17–19).

What a declaration! We can’t grasp the enormity of what happened in that moment. The once beautiful, perfect earth had just been shattered.

All of creation has been upended by the disobedience of our great, great-grandparents, Adam and Eve. Everything created by God that was once good and whole and perfect has been flipped over to become fearful, broken and imperfect.

What was once wonderful—God walking with Adam and Eve in the Garden—became terrifying.
What was once beautiful—all of creation, plants, animals and the very ground itself—was cursed.

What was once perfect—the open, vulnerable relationship between a man and woman created in God’s image—was damaged.
That’s the root, that’s the source, that’s the story of how we got to now.

Have you ever wondered how the world got into this shape? There’s an explanation to all that we’re facing in this world today—it really is about the reign of fear.

Fear of God.
Fear of others.
Fear of self.

Every possible broken place that you can imagine stems from these fears that entered the world due to Adam and Eve's sin. That fear translates into all kinds of evil, which in turn brings even more brokenness, even more fear and eventually total destruction.

And we all feel that fear—all of creation feels that fear. The apostle Paul said it this way:

"For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." (Romans 8:20–23)

Paul declared that all of creation is groaning under the curse that came when Adam sinned that all of creation is enslaved to corruption and sin that all of creation suffers the same kinds of labor pains as us, living subject to the same curse.

Depression, anxiety, suicide.
Conflict, confusion, corruption.
Divorce, domestic abuse, exploitation.
Murder, malice, envy.

That's where we're living now—and that's the state of our society. It's ruled by fear, and there doesn't appear to be any home for relief in sight.

But it's not going to *always be that way*. Fear will not always reign. We have something to look forward to. Fast-forward from our view of the past, and our present reality, to the future—all the way at the end of the Bible's storyline.

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away'" (Revelation 21:1–4).

Compare this description to the beginning of creation. We started this conversation with God walking among the first couple in the Garden. Now, at the end of all time, at the end of all fear and rebellion and corruption, once again, God is walking among His people.

Here at the end, everything has been set aright; all of creation is being recreated—the old will be gone and the new will come! There will be no more fear, no more mourning, no more crying, pain or death. God himself will live among us!

That's a wonderful promise. Our hope for the future rests on that promise. But we live here in the present, and we still deal with fear. We still deal with the effects of the Fall.

This is an a-political issue. No political leader will ever truly make one's nation great; not for lack of ideas, passion or funding, but because their approach is all wrong.

I'm not interested in being a part of any kind of government that cannot do anything about the real root of the problem: namely, me.

My brokenness, my fear, my sin. Those are the real culprits behind the evil of this world. No political leader, regardless of party affiliation, is going to be able to fix the nation they lead (or this world) so long as sin still reigns in me.

So, are we without hope now? Must we wait until the coming Day of the Lord to see relief? Must all creation continue to suffer? There is one dramatic difference now because of another huge declaration made; one that's as big as the curse God spoke about in Genesis 3.

In Mark 1 we read of how John the Baptist baptized one of his relations, calling Him the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. When that man came up out of the water, a great voice thundered from the clouds saying, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11) as the Holy Spirit descended on Him like dove (1:10).

After that moment of public affirmation and validation, the God-man from Nazareth, Jesus Christ began to preach his first recorded sermon: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the gospel" (1:15).

"The kingdom of God is at hand..."

It's time that we reframe our faith.

We've allowed society and unbelievers to make our mistakes and shortcomings and imperfections the defining characteristics of our faith. As Christians, we have been born into God's kingdom. We are citizens of another country, another place—and Christ's coming to earth the first time was about announcing the upending and resetting of this current order and system.

And that system? It's like sin turned the whole world upside-down, that creation and all that God made in the beginning were flipped upside-down. All the beauty, all the glory, all the good that existed is still present, but it's been fatally flawed by the introduction of sin, of rebellion, of fear and so have we.

We're upside-down, and everything we see is flipped over and does not work the way it was designed to function. [ILLUSTRATION: If possible, prepare to have several chairs located near the platform for illustration purposes. At this point in the message, flip the chairs over onto their backs.]

We're frustrated because we're constantly trying to arrange and rearrange the order of creation in such a way that will make it work better! [ILLUSTRATION: Begin moving the chairs around in random patterns.]

Racial conflict

Sexual dysfunction

Poverty

War

Hunger

Disease

Depression [ILLUSTRATION: Consider moving chairs around for several of those issues.]

But the problem isn't about the arrangement of our systems and policies, our procedures and protocols—the whole system is broken! Upside-down! Wrong side up!

It was never designed to work in the ways we try to arrange them, no matter how we organize them. And since we're upside-down, too, we can't figure out why it isn't working.

Enter Jesus, the Son of God, the uncreated Creator, God incarnate, validated and authorized by the Father to announce, "The kingdom of God is at hand."

For his Jewish audience, and for the rest of us, too, his announcement was earth-shaking.

It's the *resetting* of creation.

It's the *restoration* of all things.

It's the *reign and return* of the only true king.

That's the core of our faith, the truth behind our convictions. We *are not* defined by our convictions about sexuality, race or abortion. We are defined by our citizenship in his kingdom, the kingdom that was inaugurated by Jesus himself.

We have been *born again* into that kingdom. We're no longer the person we used to be! Christ has upended our lives, remaking us, reforming us, transforming us into the person he created us to be.

As he transforms us, we establish pockets of his kingdom around us, and circumstances around us begin to be changed by his transforming power. That's how the kingdom was designed to operate.

"Repent and believe the gospel"

Jesus came with this message about the kingdom, and for those people who heard him, and especially those people who were listening, he directed them to do something about it. What does it mean to repent?

Repentance is changing your mind. But it's more than that. The record of Scripture never teaches us that all the people of that era had to do was think differently to be saved. Their change in thinking had to result in changed lives. What God wants from us isn't just our minds, but all of us, in complete and humble submission to him and his rule.

Repentance means you're no longer looking to the people, programs and policies and processes of this world to solve your problems. It means you're looking to Christ, *the one* who invited you to join his kingdom; *the one* who offered you new birth; a clean slate and fresh start; *the one* who makes it possible for you to have power over sin; *the one* who gave his life to redeem us from Adam's sin, and to forgive us for our own sins. This is what makes the gospel "good news." It isn't good news to tell someone they need to repent. That only reminds us of our sin. What is good news, what makes the gospel great, is what it tells us about what Christ has done for us, to forgive us, to transform us from sinners to saints, to save us from our life of sin and the penalty of sin (death), and to adopt us as sons and daughters of God.

I know this is a lot to take in, and maybe it's more than you bargained for but you need to know the truth, not fake news.

Are you a citizen of this kingdom?
Have you been born again into this kingdom?

If not, His words by the Spirit of God are meant for you today: "the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel."