

GOING NOWHERE

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Isaiah 65:17-25

In 1819, the U.S. suffered what is viewed as its first peacetime economic depression. This incident is known as the Panic of 1819. The U.S. was, at the time, still a young republic having declared independence in 1776 and then ratified its constitution twelve years later in 1788. The Panic of 1819 was marked by bank failures, mortgage foreclosures, falling agricultural and manufacturing prices, and widespread unemployment. The causes of the Panic are complex. The primary cause had to do with a sudden tightening of credit policy by the central bank. This depression lasted several years.

In the 1830s, President Andrew Jackson engaged in a political struggle known as the Bank War. Jackson's goal was to eliminate the central bank. He was successful. However, without a central bank, the economy became subject to numerous and sudden fluctuations. The most notable of these was the Panic of 1837 which touched off a major recession that lasted until 1843. The Panic of 1837 induced a sharp downturn to the U.S. economy. This was brought about by bank failures, a lack of confidence in paper currency, and crop failures. Unemployment was widespread. In the South, the cotton market collapsed completely. The years 1837 to 1844 were marked by deflation in wages and pricing.

The effect of this economic turmoil was to shake people's confidence in the institutions that were designed to provide security—specifically the government and the banks. Because of financial uncertainty, people became increasingly open to unconventional notions of what society and civilization should look like. People became receptive to the ideas of unorthodox thinkers and those who espoused alternatives to the status quo. Consequently, in the U.S., the mid-1800s witnessed a surge in the formation of intentional communities founded around a specific ideal or belief. Most of these were communal in nature and the majority were founded on the writings of a French philosopher named Charles Fourier. Fourier declared that the secrets of a society's success were based on **concern** and **cooperation**. His followers believed that living communally would usher in a period of peace that would last for thousands of years.

Although Fourier had already died, a number of communities in the U.S. were founded on his philosophy. One of these communities was in Ohio on the banks of the Ohio River in a location that is about 300 miles north of us between Lexington and Cincinnati. In 1844, seven years after Fourier's death, right at the tail end of that economic depression initiated by the Panic of 1837, some followers of Fourier banded together and purchased property for an intentional community. There were twelve families and together they purchased 1140 acres for their commune and

farm. They named this place Utopia. Their plan was to adhere to Fourier's writings and construct an ideal community based on the sharing of work and goods.

But, as the poet wrote, "The best laid schemes of mice and men have gone astray." Sadly, the Utopia community did not survive. It lasted just two years before families began to abandon ship due to growing internal strife and jealousy and the continuing hardship of farming. As one member of the community wrote, the experiment failed because of "the want of means and the want of men."

The name Utopia for this ideal community was not accidental. The word *utopia* was coined by Sir Thomas Moore in 1516 as the name of a fictional island society in a novel written by More. This novel was intended as satire and criticism of the flawed European society with Utopia representing a perfect society. Today, we use the word *utopia* to describe a place that we consider to be idyllic.

The thing about *utopia* however is that it doesn't exist. We search for utopia but we never seem to find it. If a paradise does exist, it is ruined once a human being steps foot there. Sir Thomas More reflected this truth in the name Utopia. More created this word from two Greek words—the prefix *οὐ* which means "not" and the word *τόπος* which means "place." *Utopia* literally means *not-place* or *nowhere*. If you are going to Utopia then you are going nowhere.

Almost all utopian societies have failed. Of the 31 utopian communities started in this country in the 1800s, none survive today. Utopia truly is a not-place.

Because of the high failure rate of these communities, when we encounter a passage from scripture that describes a perfect reality such as our reading today from Isaiah, we do so with more than a bit of practiced cynicism. We read in Isaiah that God promises *a new heaven and a new earth* where the old ways are forgotten—a place teeming with promise. We read this and say, "Sure. Same old promises." But the prophet Isaiah tells of God's promise of:

- a place where there will be no need for weeping
- a place where everyone lives a long and full life
- a place where the inhabitants don't have to worry of outside armies marching through and taking everything with them
- a place where homes are safe, work is meaningful, and children are blessed
- a place where God anticipates all needs and answers prayers even before they are spoken
- a place where even wild animals live in harmony.

This place, of course, is not utopia. It is God's realm; it is God's kingdom. This kingdom is different than utopia because utopia is a human creation and is subject to human flaws and sins. But God's realm is different.

Over the past couple of months, I have discovered that I've been preaching quite frequently on the subject of God's kingdom. It is a prevalent theme in scripture and a significant theme in Jesus' teaching. But Jesus does not describe the kingdom in detail. Instead, Jesus chooses to tell us what the kingdom is like. The kingdom is like a mustard seed. It starts out small but grows large and becomes a home for the birds. The kingdom is like treasure hidden in a field. When it is discovered, it is worthwhile to sell everything in order to buy that field and attain that treasure. Many people think of the kingdom as our heavenly reward—something we shall attain after we die. But Jesus is clear in his teachings that the kingdom is present among us. It is here. It is something we should seek in our daily lives. We cannot see it but occasionally we shall encounter a glimpse or taste of the kingdom. The kingdom is something we can seek in this world and in this lifetime.

So, where is the kingdom? I believe that one place to find it is in the church. *Wherever two or three gather in my name, I am there with them* (Matthew 18:20). When we, as a church, gather in the name of our savior, as his followers, loving God with all our being, seeking to love our neighbors and engaging in acts of compassion, the kingdom is there.

The Utopians believed that with hard work and sacrifice they could single-handedly shape their own version of paradise. As Christians, we believe something else. We believe that the kingdom belongs to God and that we are invited to join the Lord on God's *holy mountain*.

Our reading from Isaiah begins with the words, *I am about to create new heavens and a new earth*. In Hebrew, the form of the verb create suggests that this creation is an ongoing activity of God's. *I am in the process of continually creating...* Creation is not finished. God is transforming the profane world into God's *holy mountain*—a place of joy, a place of meaning.

So where is the kingdom? It is nowhere. It is here. It is not yet here. To find the kingdom we must follow Christ—not just call ourselves followers of Christ, but actively and intentionally follow him. Then, with him, we can come into the kingdom and rejoice in what God is creating. Amen.¹

¹ **Sources:**

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