

“*Animal Farm* and the Kingdom of Heaven/God”  
 Epiphany 3A (January 26, 2020)  
Scriptures: Psalm 27:1, 4-5, 13-14; Matthew 4:17-23  
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word, Amen.<<

A reviewer once called George Orwell’s book *Animal Farm* “the most thought-provoking piece of literature I have ever read.”<sup>1</sup> Tuesday was the 70th anniversary of Orwell’s death, and this year, 2020, is the 75th anniversary of the publication of *Animal Farm*. “George Orwell” was a pen name. Orwell’s real name was Eric Blair - an Englishman born in Bengal, India, who served in the British colonial police, and saw firsthand the terrors of totalitarianism when he witnessed communist atrocities in Spain after the Spanish Civil War in the late 1930s. *Animal Farm* was birthed out of this experience. The book was, as one reviewer put it, “an attack on the myth of the nobility of Soviet communism.” Orwell began writing *Animal Farm* in 1943 during the Second World War, but couldn’t find a publisher in Britain or America because the Soviet Union was seen as an essential ally fighting the Nazis. At the time, critics of the Soviet Union, like Orwell, were seen as “playing dupe to the Nazis.”<sup>2</sup> But once the war ended, a publisher was found, and in just four years nearly a million copies of the book were sold around the world. And it still sells today.

*Animal Farm* tells the story of farm animals who rise up in rebellion against their human masters and take over the means of farm production. The animal revolution was spurred on by an old pig named Major, who taught the animals that they should, in his words, “work night and day, body and soul, for the overthrow of the human race,” because, he said, “nearly the whole of the produce of our labor is stolen from us by human beings,” who can’t give milk or lay eggs or pull the plow themselves. Humans give back to the animals only enough to prevent starvation, he said, but the rest they keep for themselves. After this rousing speech, the animals revolt and kick out Mr. Jones, the farmer. They then successfully defend the farm against human attempts to retake it; they teach themselves to read and write; they establish a farm bureaucracy to manage affairs; and they live by a series of rules narrowed to two simple slogans: “four legs good, two legs bad”; and “all animals are equal.” It seemed like utopia.

The brilliance of Orwell’s satire is found in what happens after the successful animal revolution. The cleverest animals on the farm are the pigs, who take over management and planning. They name one from their ranks the dear leader, execute all their rivals, force the other animals to work harder, create a secret police force of ruthless dogs to impose order, and through a propagandist pig named “Squealer” they claim that all of these changes are in the animals’ best interest. Squealer, writes Orwell, could twist the facts so thoroughly that he could “turn black into white.” *Animal Farm* ends with the animals working harder than ever, barely at subsistence, while the pigs spend their days writing reports and pushing paper, and spend their nights hosting human guests at dinner parties in the farmer’s house, playing cards and sipping whiskey. The pigs have also learned to walk on two legs, so they change the two slogans that guide animal behavior from “four legs good, two legs bad” and “all animals are equal” to “four legs good, two legs *better*” and “all animals are equal *but some animals are*

<sup>1</sup> <https://amp.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2014/sep/07/review-animal-farm-george-orwell>

<sup>2</sup> On all of this, see Rusell Baker’s Preface to George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (New York: Signet Classic, 1996 [1946]).

*more equal than others.*” In the final scene of the book, the farm animals peer through the farmhouse windows and see the pigs feasting with the humans, but they couldn’t tell the difference between pig and human.

I re-read *Animal Farm* this week and I started getting suspicious of my two cats. On Friday morning they were both staring at me as their tails swished behind them, and I thought to myself, “I know you two want food, but what else are you plotting?” Beyond making us suspicious of household pets, Orwell’s *Animal Farm* warns readers to watch for signs of totalitarianism in our leaders. It warns of political leaders who claim to be the sole mediators of truth. It warns of propagandists working in news outlets or in government, who twist facts, turning black to white and white to black. Orwell also warns us about the followers who accept without question what the Dear Leader tells them. The dear leader in *Animal Farm* is a pig named “Napoleon.” At one point in the book, a farm animal loyal to Napoleon says with conviction, “If ... Napoleon says it, it must be right ... . Napoleon is always right.” Orwell had 1940s Soviet communism in his sights, but, as with any good piece of literature, his message is timeless. Who can doubt its relevance in our day? And I can’t read it without thinking of the many failed totalitarian attempts to establish the Kingdom of God on earth in Christian history: the Holy Roman Empire in the 9th century and its oppression of Jews; the Kingdom of Jerusalem in the Holy Land after the First Crusade in the 11th and 12th centuries and its war with Muslims; Medieval Catholics and Protestants taking turns burning heretics at the stake; or Puritan New England in the 17th century and its infamous Witch Trials. One of my advisors at Harvard said that her grandmother “used to say whenever she heard of atrocities committed in Jesus’ name: ‘Poor Jesus, he would turn over in his grave if he were still there!’”<sup>3</sup> And I can’t read Orwell without thinking of those in our own time who claim that *if only* we elect (or re-elect) this or that leader, or *if only* we can pass this or that piece of legislation, or *if only* we can overturn this or that Supreme Court ruling, *then* the Kingdom of God might begin to break in upon us. *Animal Farm* is pretty clear: no it won’t if getting there means lying and cheating and suppressing votes and threatening dissenters and whittling away at human rights. The Kingdom of God, says Jesus, is different. It’s not coming with material things that can be observed,” as he says in gospels; you can’t say “here it is” or “there it is,” for, in fact, he says, “the kingdom of God is already among you.”

In today’s gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus preaches, “repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.” Matthew is the only gospel writer to use this phrase - “Kingdom of Heaven.” It appears over 30 times in Matthew’s gospel but nowhere else in the New Testament. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus proclaims that the kingdom of *God* is near. It’s the same in Luke’s gospel; and in John’s gospel Jesus speaks of *seeing* the kingdom of *God*, not the kingdom of *heaven*. Scholars have tried for centuries to figure out why Matthew alone calls it the “Kingdom of Heaven” instead of the “Kingdom of God,” but no one knows for sure. The best guess is that the word “heaven” is a circumlocution for “God.” It’s a bit like when our Jewish siblings refer to God as “Hashem” in Hebrew - “the Name” - which is another way of saying the word “God.” Likewise with Matthew’s phrase “Kingdom of Heaven.” “Heaven” is not a place; it’s another way of saying the word “God.” The first sermon Jesus preaches is, according to Matthew’s gospel, a message about this Kingdom. “Repent,” proclaims Jesus because “the Kingdom is near.” It’s interesting that when Jesus speaks about repentance he doesn’t speak of confession or remorse or even of sin - those buzzwords in Christian theology

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<sup>3</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 1.

meant to drive people to their knees. No, Jesus is using this word “repent” in its traditional Hebrew way - repent in Hebrew means “to turn around”; “change direction”; adopt a new set of values.<sup>4</sup> “Change direction,” says Jesus, “the kingdom is close.”

What’s fascinating to me as I analyze this phrase “Kingdom of God” is just how vague it is in the New Testament. Jesus preaches that the Kingdom of God is near. But, *What* is the Kingdom of God? *Where* is the Kingdom of God? *When* will it arrive? *Why* is it important? *Who* will usher it in? These are the “five ‘w’s,” as they’re called in scientific research, the basics of problem solving and information gathering: what, where, when, why, who. There are over 100 references to the “kingdom” in the New Testament. It’s something that we can *inherit*, according to St. Paul, like a retirement plan or a bequest. But it’s also something that will *arrive*, according to the Book of Revelation. The “kingdom” is something we can work to bring about, as other writers claim. But it’s also something we can *receive* if we have the trusting hearts of children. The “kingdom” is likened to leaven, in the gospels, which leavens a lump, or a mustard seed that grows and takes over a garden. And the “kingdom” *is*, writes St. Paul, justice and peace and joy. It’s waited for and worked for; it’s inherited and received; it will arrive, but when it does it will take over everything; it’s a thing, like justice and peace, but it’s also an emotion, like “joy.” The New Testament speaks of the kingdom in different ways. The kingdom of God, wrote the late New Testament scholar Marcus Borg, “is perhaps the best shorthand summary of the [entire] message ... of Jesus.”<sup>5</sup> “The Kingdom,” he says, “is not about heaven; it is for the earth. ... We pray for the coming of God’s Kingdom on earth every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer: ‘Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on *earth*, as it already is in heaven,’ [because, says Borg,] ... ‘Heaven’s in great shape; earth is where [all] the problems are’.”<sup>6</sup>

But, *What* is this kingdom? *Where* is it? *When* will it arrive? *Why* is it important? *Who* will bring it about? We can’t begin to answer such questions without first troubling the word “kingdom” itself. A “kingdom” is ruled over by a “king” - a patriarchal male. Plus, didn’t we Americans revolt to free ourselves from the whole idea of monarchy? For these reasons, American New Testament scholars have never been comfortable with the notion of “kingdom,” and have suggested more innocuous, gender-neutral phrases instead, like “realm of God” or “government of God” or even “kin-dom” instead of “kingdom” - a realm where all are “kin” instead of a realm where one is “king.” But what’s so interesting to me as I read today’s story in Matthew’s gospel is that Jesus proclaims the nearness of the kingdom, but then quickly pivots to focus on people: he invites peasant fishermen to follow him and then he begins to heal and tend to the needs of the hurting. Which makes me think that the “kingdom” or “kin-dom” or “realm” is not a geo-political space, but a movement. A movement that focuses on people and their needs instead of on establishing a space or nation with boundaries and borders. The kingdom of God is *not* found in nation-states or in Christendoms or in establishing utopias on farms. The kingdom is found in a single phrase used by Jesus: “follow me.” Follow me as I heal and teach; follow me as I treat everyone as a human being instead of as an object; follow me as I show you what love in flesh looks like; follow me as I create a movement of justice and peace - a movement filled with joy and laughter and dancing and singing and the celebration of life. Follow me, says Jesus, and you

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<sup>4</sup> E.g., Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, and James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV, Year A* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 116.

<sup>5</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 131.

<sup>6</sup> Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, 133.

will find the kingdom. To the what, where, when, why, and who questions, Jesus responds: Follow me and I'll show you.

Writer Shane Claiborne offers a modern example of following Jesus. Claiborne is known for being provocative, and he claims to be an evangelical, though not like the ones who get all the air-time on TV. He once said, "If we were to set out to establish a religion in polar opposite to the Beatitudes Jesus taught, it would look strikingly similar to the pop Christianity that has taken over the airwaves of North America."<sup>7</sup> This past Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Claiborne posted a video of himself on Twitter melting down an assault rifle and hammering it into a shovel - a modern take on those old Hebrew prophecies about peace that speak of turning spears into pruning hooks. Before the U.S. invaded Iraq, Claiborne flew to Baghdad to befriend Iraqis and show them that not all Christians support war. He also spent time with Mother Teresa in Calcutta slums to learn the meaning of being a healing presence. Following Jesus, he says, changed my life, and "I am still recovering from my conversion." In his book *The Irresistible Revolution*, Claiborne tells a story about preparing a video montage for an adult education lesson in his church. "Our goal," he writes, "was to capture people's responses to the word *Christian*, so we took a video camera and hit the streets [of Philadelphia], from the trendy arts district to the suburbs. We asked people to say the first word that came to mind in response to each word we said: 'snow,' 'eagles' (it's Philly, [and everyone said "football"]], 'teenagers,' and finally 'Christian.' When people heard the word Christian, they stopped in their tracks. I will never forget their responses: 'fake,' 'hypocrites,' 'church,' 'boring.' One guy even said, 'used-to-be-one' (sort of one word). I will also never forget," writes Claiborne, "what they didn't say. Not one of the people we asked that day said 'love.' No one said 'grace.' No one said 'community.' We live in an age," he says, "in which people, when they hear the word Christian, are much more likely to think of people [filled with] hate than people who love outcasts . . . . Bumper stickers and buttons read, 'Jesus, save me from your followers.' . . . But," he concludes, "I have tremendous hope that a new kind of Christianity is emerging."<sup>8</sup> Social justice warriors and "protestors are everywhere," he says, "but I think the world is desperately in need of [loving] prophets, those little voices that can point us toward another future."<sup>9</sup> Not a supposed utopia that gets imposed from the top, but something that bubbles up from transformed hearts on the ground and in the pews.

"Come and see," says Jesus. "Follow me, and I'll show you," he says. We're not heading for a place - a political space or a realm that one crosses into after checking a passport at the border. No, says Jesus, the kingdom is already in your midst. It's so close. Follow me, build a community, love your neighbors, and I will help you to see it. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 269. Claiborne is actually quoting his mentor, Tony Campolo.

<sup>8</sup> Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution*, 269-270.

<sup>9</sup> Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution*, 309.