

## I. Advanced Organizer

### A. Stories of two heroes of the faith

1. In his autobiography, **Martin Luther King Jr. told the story of one of the defining moments of his life.** He was 27 years old, a young husband and father of an infant. He had been serving as the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama only a couple of years. And then on December 1st, 1955, Rosa Parks stayed sitting on that bus, kicking off the Montgomery Bus Boycott. **Dr. King was asked to be the clergy spokesperson for the movement.** He reluctantly agreed, hoping the whole thing would be resolved quickly. But by six weeks later it was still going and he had become a target, receiving thirty to forty death threats from whites a day. **One hit him particularly hard, as he hung up the phone after a nasty call in the middle of the night, King had hit a breaking point.** He was tossing and turning, couldn't sleep. He got up and put on a pot of coffee, and he was reflecting on his wife and new born baby in the other room. He was aware that he could be taken from them, or them from him. And he got to the point that he realized no one could help him, not his dad, not his mom. In his words:

a) *"You've got to call on that something in that person that your Daddy used to tell you about, that power that can make a way out of no way."*

*With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory: "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now, I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. Now, I am afraid. And I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."*

*It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you. Even until the end of the world."*

*I tell you I've seen the lightning flash. I've heard the thunder roar. I've felt sin breakers dashing trying to conquer my soul. But I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me alone. At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.*

- b) **Three nights later, King's house was bombed.** But King had had the encounter with God he needed for he and his family to continue the work with courage and a firm commitment to non-violence, even in the face of great danger.
2. **Mother Teresa** has long been one of the modern heroes of the Catholic Faith and far beyond it. Her humble work with the lepers in Calcutta inspired millions. It was as a young woman she sense Jesus invitation to give her life to that work, and give her life to it in humility, she did. And throughout her life, her words encouraged and reassured scores of Christians and others. But as her private letters that were published posthumously revealed, **she suffered for the last several decades of her life from what seemed to be the silence of God:**

- a) In one undated letter, Mother Teresa writes, *“my God, I have no faith. I dare not utter the words and thoughts that crowd my heart, afraid to uncover them because of the blasphemy. If there be God, please forgive me. When I try to raise my thoughts to heaven, there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul. I am told God loves me, and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great, nothing touches my soul.”*

B. **We’re in a teaching series called “It’s Complicated”**, considering paradoxes of Jesus centered faith and how leaning into them rather than trying to just simplify them can actually help us get closer to God.

1. Today we’re gonna **consider a classic paradox of Jesus’ centered faith, and this paradox is related to our first two stories**. Why would these two twentieth century heroes of the faith have such different experiences? Did one of them do something wrong? Weren’t they both praying? Weren’t they both in need of divine direction? Isn’t God capable of speaking to both of them, so why would they not both have a sense of revelation?
2. **There are probably a number of ways someone might try to answer these question.**
  - a) Some would discount one experience or the other.
    - (1) **There are certainly Christians who believe that we live in a period of history when people don’t hear words from God.** They don’t experience the prophetic. They don’t see miracles. People aren’t healed. That’s not a part of how God works in this moment. That was something that happened maybe in the past, maybe it’s something that will happen in the future, but not now. Essentially, Dr. King was wrong.
    - (2) **There are others who have a sense that, at least since the coming of Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit, God is always active and doing supernatural stuff, and if we’re not seeing it, maybe that’s just because we’re not doing things quite right.** Everyone who wants to can hear from God if they try, and when you pray for stuff it happens, people should be supernaturally healed as you pray, and so on. So from this point of view, Mother Teresa was somehow in error.
  - b) **But a lot of folks**, particularly from the church tradition I have roots in, **recognize that neither of those ways of viewing Jesus-centered faith seems to be fully true.** Neither of them seem to encapsulate the breadth of experiences people seem to have with God. Many folks find both of them lacking in their capacity to help us hold the story of Scripture together. A more nuanced understanding seems necessary. **It’s more complicated then either of the first set of answers seems to give room for.**

C. **The questions around how to interpret the activity of God in the world go back a long time, and they certainly surrounded Jesus.** So let’s start by taking a look at how he answered some of the questions coming to him.

## II. Luke 7:18-23

A. The story were gonna look at involves **two important characters: Jesus and John the Baptist. First some context.**

1. John’s story actually proceed’s Jesus’, and we get the sense that **John’s destiny is tangled up in preparing people to receive Jesus and the work he was coming to do.** Jesus was still working as a carpenter when, this strange religious ascetic eating locusts and honey appears in the desert preaching repentance. **Preaching that God is coming and John is there to prepare the way for the King.** People come out from the cities and villages to hear him and be baptized by him in the Jordan River. Jesus is one of them, and

as he is being baptized, **John recognizes who he is**. John says he's not worthy to untie his sandals, but Jesus insists on being baptized by him. And of course, when he is, a cosmic voice is heard saying "This is my Son, with whom I'm well pleased." The Spirit alights on Jesus like a dove. And this is event is the big initiation into Jesus' season of ministry.

2. **John, on the other hand seems to have a change in fortune.** He gets caught up in the political sex scandal of his day. Herod, the local ruler sanctioned by Rome, has become infatuated with a woman who was not his wife, and manipulates the law to take her for his own. **When John the baptist publicly speaks out against this, Herod throws him in prison.** And it's while he's in prison, Jesus' ministry is taking off. He's preaching, he begins healing people. Crowds are drawn to him. In Luke 7, right before our passage, two big miracles happen: Jesus heals the servant of a Roman Centurion, which is a Roman soldier, and Jesus raises a widow's son from the dead. And then we get this story.

**B. 18 John's disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, 19 he sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"**

**20 When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'"**

**21 At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. 22 So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. 23 Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."**

1. So John is in prison and his followers have been keeping him up to date on the goings on in the outside world, cause you know, there's no Twitter or Cable News for him to follow. And **he hears the stories, John seems genuinely confused. Why is he confused?** Luke seems to think his question about Jesus' identity is important enough that he includes it twice in a row. That's a clue that Luke thinks it's a big deal that John is asking this question. So what's the question about?

a) **This story comes six chapters in Luke's account after the story of John's conception.** As Luke tells it, John was miraculously conceived to an elderly previously barren woman with the promise that he was coming to be the prophet, in the spirit of Elijah, making the way for the Lord. A few verses later, the story says that when the pregnant virgin Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, the child in Elizabeth's womb, John, leaps as he divinely recognizes the other child in the womb, Jesus. **The story is that John has been so clear in his calling and identity, to make the way open for Jesus, who he understood to be the Messiah, his responsiveness to the Spirit and that call on his life had been there even before his birth.** And yet now some thirty years later that Jesus is preaching, is making headway as a popular rabbi, is apparently even performing miracles, John seems to doubt that Jesus is the Messiah. Why?

2. Both John's question and Jesus' answer have to do not just with who these guys were or even what was happening in the moment. **They both had to do with what was understood in their day to be the future: the cosmic future.** How the story of the world as they understood it was supposed to end. **The question and answer had to do with the big theological word seminarians call "eschatology", meaning the study of the**

**End Times, or as Merriam Webster says, “a branch of theology concerned with the final events in the history of the world”.**

3. Now talking eschatology is a good way to introduce a lot of complexity, and we’re not gonna go too far into the weeds. But we also can’t avoid talking about it because this is essentially what the debate is about.
4. **By the time that Jesus came there was a variety of visions in Israel about what the coming Anointed One or Messiah would be.** They all understood the Messiah to be a political leader, a King who would restore Israel to an independent nation and reign on its throne. **But many also understood the prophets to be saying that this leader was more than a mere mortal.** This was a *‘Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,’* whose *“kingdom would never end.”* He would bring ultimate judgment and justice. He would set things to right. **He would bring shalom - a word that meant peace and holistic wellbeing to all the people.** The Messiah would bring heaven to earth, bringing the reign of God itself.
5. And so here John is in prison and he’s hearing about all the miracles Jesus is performing. And he thinks, **“you know, I thought you were the Messiah. I thought that meant the End Times were here. But this doesn’t look like what it was supposed to be.”** Have the end times come, are they still in the future? Are you God’s Anointed One or should we look for another?
  - a) **You can understand the confusion. If the Messiah coming means freeing the captives, why is John, the forerunner of the Messiah stuck in prison?** If the Messiah coming means liberating the Israelites by vanquishing Rome, why is Jesus helping out a Roman soldier?
6. And it’s true that some of things John expected weren’t happening the way he thought they should be. But **as John’s question is delivered by his messengers to Jesus, Luke points us to what is happening;** the actions that are ultimately the answer to John’s deeper question about whether God’s kingdom was indeed coming to earth.
  - a) Luke says right there and then as the questions are being asked, Jesus is healing people. *‘At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind.’*
  - b) And Jesus words called the importance of this out. **All the things he was doing were also connected to the promises of the prophets,** they were also part of the Messianic expectation.
  - c) “Tell John this”, Jesus says: *“The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.”*
  - d) If you’re not familiar with ancient prophecies, these words might not mean a lot. They might be impressive for sure, but they don’t resolve the question of how Jesus is connected to John’s eschatology. But John would have understood the message Jesus was sending. Because each of the things Jesus sites recalls the words of Isaiah.
    - (1) Isaiah 35: **5 Then blind eyes will open, deaf ears will hear. 6 Then the lame will leap like a deer, the mute tongue will shout for joy...**
    - (2) Isaiah 26:19 **Your dead will come back to life; your corpses will rise up. Wake up and shout joyfully, you who live in the ground! For you will grow like plants drenched with the morning dew, and the earth will bring forth its dead spirits.**

(3) Isaiah 29:18 ***At that time the deaf will be able to hear words read from a scroll, and the eyes of the blind will be able to see through deep darkness.19 The downtrodden will again rejoice in the Lord; the poor among humankind will take delight in the Holy One of Israel.***

(4) Isaiah 61:1 ***The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me, because the Lord has chosen me. He has commissioned me to encourage the poor, to help the brokenhearted, to decree the release of captives, and the freeing of prisoners...***

e) In summary...**yes John. It's happening.** This is God on the move: the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the good news is proclaimed to the poor.

7. **Yes, this is the era you were looking ahead to. This is the Messianic Age, the coming of God's Kingdom. And it's also different than you thought it would be.**

a) **Jesus ends with this interesting final comment. "Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."** Others translate it "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me". The Greek word he's using for stumbling or taking offense is "*skandalon*" - also the origin of our word scandalize. Essentially I think he's saying, **"don't let the ways that I don't match your perceptions keep you from experiencing what God is doing. Don't be so scandalized by my unorthodox ways that you can't experience God's coming."**

b) Of course, **the ways that Jesus did not match some of the Messianic expectations that surrounded him only got bigger.** Jesus didn't take up arms against Rome. He didn't secure John's release from prison. **John the baptist was executed by the state;** he died an innocent for speaking uncomfortable truth to power. **And of course Jesus followed John's footsteps not only into ministry, but also into an unjust death at the hands of the state.**

c) **But that death,** as unexpected as it was, as counter as it appeared to the eschatology of the day, **was not the end of Jesus' story. That is the center of Jesus-centered faith.** The cross was not the end. The reign of God, God's kingdom continued to break through, most spectacularly through Jesus resurrection, introducing a new kind of power; a life-after death power into existence, and demonstrating a powerful hope **that God's shalom-making work was still unfolding.**

C. All of this brings us finally to the paradox that many find helpful in answering our initial questions about why sometimes we see what looks like the activity of God, and sometimes we don't. **It's often called "The Now and The Not Yet"**

1. The Now and the Not Yet speaks to the same question John was asking: how do we understand what's happening now in relationship to the great cosmic ending. And **for many theologians, this understanding is centered in this thing Jesus seemed to talk a lot about, the *basilea tou theou* - in English, we often say "the kingdom of God."**

2. **Clearly part of what John misunderstood was the idea that the "Kingdom" coming meant a political state being established.** Jesus did talk a lot about the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven coming, and he used all kinds of pictures to try to demonstrate it, but it didn't look like a political state. It looked like other things - yeast working through dough, a mustard seed growing to a great tree.

3. **What if the kingdom wasn't a place or a government entity but a state of being - a relationship,** a reality where God's ways grow and become more and more powerful in the

world, where those that want to follow God come under that reign, they allow God to be their sovereign, and the kingdom increases.

4. **What does God's reign look like?** I'll be honest, I myself can feel uncomfortable with the language of God as a monarch, because it can paint God as an oppressor who concentrates power in his macho hands, but that is the opposite of the kind of kingdom Jesus seems to be speaking of. Jesus demonstrates an upside-down kind of kingdom of *shalom* that must be received by becoming like children, a kingdom in which the powerful are made weak and those the world considers weak or foolish are centered and celebrated. **A kingdom not maintained by the power of violence but through thorough the power of self-giving love**
5. **This is the kingdom that Jesus was initiating.** That's what the signs he was doing and told John to pay attention point to: God's eschatological work is indeed happening. The Kingdom is coming. **In a sense, with Jesus it has come. The kingdom is here now.** Jesus performs miracles. He does amazing things. He dies and is raised from the dead. And then after he ascends to heaven, the Spirit is sent, empowering Jesus's followers to do the same kind of kingdom work that Jesus initiated with the promise that Jesus would be with them always to the end of the age. The same promise Dr. King sensed in his kitchen that night in 1956.
6. **But the Kingdom hasn't come in its fulness. The end of the age has not arrived.**
  - a) The "last days" have begun, but they're not done. This is not the end of the story. The kingdom has not fully come. It is now, but it is also not yet.
7. Theologians call this "**Inaugurated Eschatology**". The end has begun, but it has only begun.
  - a) *"The resurrection completes the inauguration of God's kingdom. . . . It is the decisive event demonstrating that God's kingdom really has been launched on earth as it is in heaven."* - NT Wright
  - b) So the Kingdom is here and it's also coming more fully. We have glimpses of what it will be like but it's not fully realized.
  - c) **If that's the case what are we supposed to think about "The End" end?** Will there be a rapture? Is Jesus literally coming again in a flash of light? There are a lot of theologians that have different theories, often drawn passionately from how they read the prophets or Revelation. But as this story shows us, even the most called, learned, and prophetic, like John the Baptist, can get these things wrong. We would do well to hold our theories lightly, recognizing we're in the area of considering great mystery.
  - d) **What I am comfortable standing in is a belief that this life that we're in the midst of, this year, this climate, this moment is not the end.** My faith is rooted in the hope that this life is not all there is. That there is evidence of something beyond, there are moments of glory that have been experienced, there are signs and wonders to be encountered, there is an arc of history that is strained but is slowly bending over time toward justice, and in **all of that** I have hope that this is not how the story ends.
  - e) **It reminds me of the end of *The Last Jedi*** that came out late last year. If you haven't seen it, sorry - but it ends somewhat bleakly, but not despairingly. There were not very many resistance fighters left on that ship at the end of the movie, and yet Leia, the general tells young Rey with confidence "we have everything we need". We haven't seen that last film yet, but we can sense the story isn't over. We've seen what Rey can do. We saw the young child at the end using the force to pick up a broom. There are signs that the resistance can rise again. But we have not reached the age where the struggle is over.

8. **The now and the not yet suggests that we can pray and sometimes folks are healed and sometimes they aren't.** Some experience the miraculous, and some hearts are broken by tragedy and disappointment.

- a) I personally have seen too much to dismiss this kingdom stuff. I have seen things I can't logically explain any other way.
  - (1) Moments of experiencing the universe interacting with me, God seeming to lead me and give me different puzzle pieces that have come together over decades in ways I couldn't have predicted or orchestrated
  - (2) I have prayed for people and seen them healed
  - (3) I have heard words that seem to be from God.
  - (4) But I've also experienced lots of silence. Lots of disappointment. Lots of times where it wasn't clear our prayers were answered.

9. **It's hard to hold the tension of an inaugurated eschatology - it's hard to hold "now" in one hand and "not yet" in another**

- a) Some folks **lean heavily into the kingdom is "not yet". This leads to fatalism.** Why pray? What would God actually do?
- b) Others lean **too heavily into the kingdom is "now".** This can lead to belief that if you just pray hard enough or believe the right way, miracles will happen, prosperity will come to you, you don't have to experience suffering. But as we saw with John, as we saw with Jesus, **new creation was not birthed in triumphalism, it was birthed in suffering.** Resurrection comes after death. In this season of tension, we must have both.

D. So what? **What do we do with all this? Truthfully I think that's the most important question of this teaching. If this Now and Not Yet paradox may be true,** if we are in a moment of Inaugurated Eschatology, **what does it mean for how we live? Two takeaways:**

1. **The Now and Not Yet is an invitation to mystery, not a justification for suffering or injustice.**

- a) What has made me ambivalent about even teaching this paradox is **the way that I feel like I have seen it be used by theologians, particularly by people of privilege, to minimize the reality of suffering.** "Yes, it's sad that Mother Teresa didn't hear from God, but that doesn't mean God's not real. It just means we're living in the Now and the Not Yet." "Yes, it's bad that racism plagues our nation, or people are starving to death while others are throwing away food, or the planet is being destroyed, but that's just the Now and the Not Yet."
- b) No, we are not called to use our theology to distance ourselves from suffering, or to minimize it with a pie in the sky when you die kind of faith. Rather we are invited to see that, far from justifying suffering with theology, **we have a God who identifies with the suffering even in the inauguration.** Jesus enters the suffering, encounters folks in the suffering, even while making a way for new creation.
- c) **We don't have to suffer alone.** At times, like Dr. King we may actually find Jesus in the suffering, and in him encounter hope that this is not the end for us, as it was not the end for him.
  - (1) Inaugurated Eschatology hasn't only been used by charismatics to argue for praying for miracles even though they often don't happen, **Black Liberation Theologian James Cone told us it was the same kind of theology that kept enslaved black Christians going,** as they looked toward liberation they believed must come in the age to come, but in this age, too. He says it this way:

- (a) *Black hope accepts history, but believes that the historical is in motion, moving toward a divine fulfillment. It is the belief that things can be radically otherwise than they are: that reality is not fixed, but is moving in the direction of human liberation. To believe that there was hope in the midst of oppression meant that black slaves' vision of the future was not limited to their present state of slavery. They looked beyond the condition of servitude and perceived that the real meaning of their existence was still to come.*
2. Which brings me to our last important takeaway: **If this is true, the role of those of us in these final chapters, however long they go, is to participate in the bringing of the "Not Yet" into the "Now".**
- a) **We're not meant to be passively waiting for the Not Yet**, we're commissioned to be the sent ones of God who bring into reality, who pray and embody, "let your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven."
  - b) This means yes, **praying for signs and wonders**; making space for miracles, mystical experiences, etc.
  - c) It means **sharing the truth of God's good reign** bringing freedom and life and shalom to the world with those we encounter.
  - d) But it also means **doing the work of justice**. Black contemporary theologian **Ekemini Uwan** gave a talk on Inaugurated Eschatology and Black Lives Matter where she made a **theological case for not only praying, but voting, community organizing, protesting, and donating to support candidates and policies that bring greater equity for black lives**.
  - e) Beginning next week, this kind of work will be taking place around the country, as **Dr. William Barber** and others lead a nationwide movement of nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience called **The Poor People's Campaign**. The leaders call it moral fusion organizing, intended to pick up the work of Dr. King 50 years after his death and confront the issues of **poverty, systemic racism, the war economy, and ecological devastation**. Some of us have started to get involved, and I would encourage all of you to consider if you might want to be involved in some way - check out their website, sign up for their mailing list. You could pray. You could donate. Some of us may feel called to attend a training on risking arrest and demonstrating through non-violent means, and then be a part of the direct actions that will be taking place in Sacramento and other settings around the state.
  - f) **All of this - the spiritual and social engagement is the necessary**. All of this participates in the reign of God coming to fulness in our world. All of it is taking seriously our commission to participate with the kingdom coming as we partner with more of the not yet becoming the now.
  - g) Both Dr. King and Mother Teresa had different experiences at times of the divine, they both experienced the effects of the Now and the Not Yet in different ways for better or for worse, but they also both gave their lives to the work of bringing the Not Yet into being. For all her doubts, Mother Teresa left this world with more of the kingdom having come to earth than when she began. It's for this reason, we're right to call her a saint.
  - h) In the same way, Haven, we have the opportunity to be a part of embodying the kingdom here and now, as we pray, "let your kingdom come, God of shalom, on earth day by day, more and more, as it is in heaven." Amen.



3. *End with prayer of discernment about where to lean in more: spiritual, social, or both. And ask God to help Haven be a community that is embodying God's shalom coming in the world in a way that brings more of that reality into being.*

**Questions for Reflection and Conversation:**

1. Where have you seen the tensions of the "Now and the Not Yet" play out in your faith journey?
2. Where have you been challenged to expect things of God (expecting the kingdom to come now)? Where have you been disappointed because God's kingdom seems to be "not yet"?
3. How might God be inviting you into participating more directly in embodying the "not yet" in the "now"?