



Presbyterians *Read*



Week 1

“Jesus did indeed make it clear that God’s commands mattered deeply, but that was in the context of him healing people, celebrating God’s kingdom with all kinds of unlikely people, so that somehow, when he was around, holiness seemed different: exciting, liberating, rather than constricting and gloomy” (Wright, p. 28).

Theme: The Kingdom of God has Come Near

Opening Psalm

To open your discussion each week, we recommend reading a psalm together. N.T. Wright uses the psalms from the Revised Common Lectionary as the basis for his Sunday devotions. This week’s psalm is Psalm 32.

General Opening Questions

Depending on your group, you may want to start with a general opening question. Here are a few options that you can use throughout the study:

- What struck you about this week’s readings?
- Is there a specific passage from this week’s readings that caught your attention? Why?
- What did you find challenging about this week’s reading?
- Was there a theme in this week’s readings that stood out?

Overview of Theme

We recommend reading this overview together as a group. It will help contextualize the discussion questions and focus the conversation.

John the Baptist is the first one in the Gospel of Matthew to declare “the kingdom of heaven has come near!” (3.2). The term the kingdom of heaven, also called “the kingdom of God,” is repeated over thirty times in Matthew, most often by Jesus himself. For those listening to John the Baptist and Jesus, the notion of the kingdom of God would not have been new.

The Jewish community at the time of Jesus would have been well-versed in the prophecies of Isaiah. One of Isaiah’s key prophecies, spoken to the people of Israel after the destruction of the Holy city of Jerusalem, concerned a messenger coming to pave the way for God to return and set up a divine kingdom on earth. Wright summarizes their understanding of this prophecy as follows: “One day God will come back to rescue us. He’ll come back and take charge of the whole world, and everything will be right at last. The God of heaven will be king of the earth! That’s what we’re waiting for” (p. 5).

More than any of the other gospels, Matthew focuses on Jesus as a fulfillment of the Hebrew prophets' predictions about a future messiah who would bring God's heavenly kingdom to earth. In this week's readings, Wright brings our attention to the moments in Jesus' ministry when his followers witnessed signs that God's reign had indeed come near. Jesus' teachings and his ability to perform miracles and cast out demons pointed to the truth of who he was: "Jesus was and is God's Messiah, his chosen one, fulfilling the ancient scriptures, bringing the age-old hope into reality. He was and is the ultimate place where heaven and earth meet" (p. 29).

The coming of God's reign was part of Israel's story long before God gave the world the gift of Jesus. The good news that Jesus declared was that the long-awaited time had finally come! Through Jesus' life and ministry, God's reign was given a new direction and a new urgency. This new direction was towards the healing and liberation of all people, particularly those who are marginalized and excluded.

Reading Focus

In this week's readings, Wright brings us into the middle of the action of several key stories about Jesus that form the basis of Christian faith: Jesus giving the sermon on the mount, teaching his disciples the Lord's prayer, calming the storm, eating with tax collectors and being transfigured. Wright invites his readers into the stories by saying, "Come with me into the crowd that followed Jesus away" (p. 15) and "Let's go on that boat and think what it is like" (p. 22).

As we place ourselves as observers in the story, Wright guides us in observing how those watching and learning from Jesus at the time would have reacted to his message and miracles. He also invites us to observe our own reactions, asking: Who is this man? What is this reign of God? What is being asked of us and our communities in this new kingdom that he declares is here?

As we continue reading in the coming weeks, let's keep in mind this dual purpose of watching the experiences of Jesus' earliest followers while also observing our own.

Opening Discussion Questions

- 1) In several of this week's devotions, Wright invites us to imagine that we are there with Jesus' early followers, hearing his teachings and witnessing signs of the kingdom. Which of the stories covered this week were you most easily able to imagine yourself in? What stood out to you most about what you saw and heard when you imagined yourself in that story?
- 2) Wright states that it is a mistake to see the beatitudes as a list of rules such as "you've got to try hard to be poor in spirit, to mourn, to be meek, and so on" (14). Instead, he says we should see them as "a royal announcement that God is turning the world upside down, or, rather—the right way up" (14). The kingdom values that Jesus describes in the beatitudes were counter-cultural in Jesus' day. They still are. Who are some of the people who are celebrated as "blessed" because of wealth and success today? Who would Jesus name as truly blessed in his royal announcement if he were making it today? Consider your own status in society. Where would you place yourself in this royal announcement?

Key Scripture Verse: Matthew 17:1-9

This week we are going to read the story of the transfiguration in three different translations. As each of the translations are read, focus on "being a fifth member of the party, going up the mountain with Jesus leading the way" as Wright suggests (p. 27). Imagine that, like those with Jesus, you have begun to believe that Jesus is God's Messiah, but you do not yet understand what it means for you and the people of your community.

- Read N.T. Wright’s translation of Matthew 17:1-9 (found below and on p. 27)
- Read or listen to a different translation of your choice.
- Read or listen to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of Matthew 17:1-9

Matthew 17:1-9

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and James’s brother John, and led them off up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transformed in front of them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light. Then, astonishingly, Moses and Elijah appeared to them. They were talking with Jesus.

Peter just had to say something. “Master, he said to Jesus, “it’s wonderful for us to be here! If you want, I’ll make three shelters here—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah!”

While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them. Then there came a voice out of the cloud. “This is my dear son,” said the voice, “and I’m delighted with him. Pay attention to him.”

When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were scared out of their wits. Jesus came up and touched them.

“Get up,” he said, “and don’t be afraid.”

When they raised their eyes, they saw nobody except Jesus, all by himself.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them strict instructions. “Don’t tell anyone about the vision,” he said, “until the son of man has been raised from the dead.”

Biblical Reflection Discussion Prompts:

- 1) As you journeyed with the disciples up the mountain with Jesus, what were you thinking about? When you saw Jesus transfigured, what about the scene most caught your eye? What were your feelings when you heard the voice from heaven? What did it feel like to be touched by Jesus and reassured not to be afraid? What were you thinking when Jesus asked you to not tell anyone until he was raised from the dead?
- 2) After seeing Jesus transfigured, Peter offers to make dwellings for Jesus, Moses and Elijah on top of the mountain. But before they could go any further with Peter’s plan, the disciples witness a second miracle: a voice from heaven calling Jesus his son! Thinking about what we’ve already learned about the kingdom of God, why does God lead Peter and the other disciples away from creating the dwelling places?
- 3) The Transfiguration is a clear and dramatic sign that heaven and earth have met in Jesus. But it is also an elusive sign; it happens in a few stunning moments and then it is over. Like Peter, we often want to hold on to our experiences with God, to pin them down, even when they resist the boxes that we put them in. Where do you see this tendency in your life or church community?

Closing Prayer

To close your discussion each week, we recommend saying the Lord’s prayer together. For suggestions on using the Lord’s prayer as a guide for intercessory prayer, see the Lenten Spiritual Practice guidelines.

