

*You can see all the stars as you walk down Hollywood Boulevard  
Some that you recognize, some that you've hardly even heard of*

This line is from the song, "Celluloid Heroes," written by Ray Davies, the lead singer of the classic British rock band, *The Kinks*. The majority of the song deals with the trials of various people who have stars on Hollywood Boulevard: Rudolf Valentino, Greta Garbo, Marilyn Monroe. As Ray describes them,

*People who worked and suffered and struggled for fame  
Some who succeeded, some who suffered in vain*

But at the end, the theme of the song shifts. Instead of talking about the stars, Ray Davies gets very introspective. He talks about himself. He says,

*I wish my life was nonstop Hollywood movie show  
A fantasy world of celluloid villains and heroes  
Because celluloid heroes never feel any pain  
And celluloid heroes never really die*

And that's a powerful fantasy. Never feel any pain. Never really die. That's escapism at its best.

I don't know about you, but for me, such an idea is incredibly seductive. Yes, I live in the wealthiest, most powerful country in the history of the world. Yes, I live in a comfortable, suburban, middle class setting. But I know things are not always easy. In my life. In your lives. Disease, fear, debt, unemployment, pain, death. Those are parts of our reality.

At times, it seems like a wonderful fantasy to be able to escape that reality. "Beam me up, Scotty." "Calgon, take me away."

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Almost 200 years ago there was a group who had such longings of escape. They read the Bible selectively, looking for a loophole, an escape clause. They found what they thought they were looking for in couple of verses of 1 Thessalonians.

They decided, that, contrary to what every other Christian group believed, there was not only going to be a second coming. There was also going to be a third coming. In the early 1800's, this small minority group of Christians came up with the idea that before the difficulties associated with the end of the world, Jesus would somehow come and secretly sneak his people out. He would literally beam his followers up and leave the rest of humanity behind to suffer. They labeled this idea "the Rapture." Later, and more technically it was labeled a "pre-tribulation pre-millenarian rapture."

It was a rather strange, 2-tier system. Jesus would come back two more times. There'd be a secret second coming, and years later a more public third coming. And there would be two resurrections, an initial one for believers, and a second one for everyone else. Strangely, this idea has gained a lot of traction in some Protestant circles in the past few decades.

The rapture has no real basis in the plain text of scripture. And yet it's become quite popular, especially in our part of the world.

You've probably seen the bumper stickers:  
"In case of rapture, this car will be driverless."

I actually prefer the bumper sticker,  
"In case of rapture, I get your car."

You may know of the *Left Behind* books by Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye. They've sold millions of copies--capitalism is a great thing--more power to them.

And if you're reading *Left Behind* as escapist fiction, that's okay. But as Biblically based doctrine, it's extremely shaky. It's putting way too much weight upon a questionable interpretation of a few verses.

But it's seductive. If you're a good Christian, God is going to rescue you from suffering.

Some gospel hymns reflect this attitude: "I'll fly away," or "This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through." In this kind of thinking, the Kingdom of God is all about hope and escape from the world. The Kingdom is coming.

Of course, there is some truth in this attitude. We as Christians do look forward to the coming Reign of God, we look forward to the return of Christ. The Kingdom of Heaven in all of its fullness is something we look forward to with anticipation and excitement.

However, and this is an enormous however... HOWEVER, if we just view the Kingdom as something out there that is coming someday, we miss a huge part of the Christian Gospel.

One of the great paradoxes of Christianity is that God's Kingdom is both already and not yet. The Kingdom is here among us, while it is also still to come in all its glory. Jesus in his teaching proclaimed both a coming Kingdom and a present Kingdom. If we focus too much on one or the other, we miss an important part of the Good News.

In this morning's Gospel reading, Jesus speaks in some very concrete ways about the kingdom among us. And Jesus is not talking in some sort of idealistic "stained glass" way.

Jesus isn't talking about streets paved with gold or choirs of angels. Jesus is talking about common earthly things: pearls, mustard seeds, coins, nets, yeast. These images remind us that the Kingdom of Heaven is not just confined to Heaven. It's not just found in the holiest of holy places. It's present in the ordinary as well. It's among you. It's right under your nose. It's right where you might not expect it to be.

The seeds of the Kingdom can bear great fruit, not just in the indefinite future, but soon. A mustard seed grows into a huge bush in the course of a single summer.

Yeast leavens dough in just a few hours. These tiny things, mustard seeds and yeast, yield huge results. It's easy to overlook them if you're not careful.

Or think, Jesus says, about coins buried in a field. They've been buried there and forgotten. People have plowed and walked over the land. And the coins have been buried there, right under their noses and they missed it. But when a man found the buried treasure, he sold all he had to purchase the field. If the man wasn't aware of what was going on, he might have overlooked the great treasure that was waiting for him.

Part of our calling as Christians is to have our eyes open and looking for God, not just in the hereafter, but in the here and now as well.

The 20th century monk and writer, Thomas Merton, once said that people who were looking and searching for the Kingdom of Heaven "out there," or "far off" were best compared to people "riding on an ox looking for an ox."

In other words, God's realm, God's kingdom is often right in front of our noses, if only we'll look for it.

This is something that was proclaimed by our Celtic ancestors in faith. They had a saying, that heaven and earth are only three feet apart. And in some places, that distance is even smaller.

In other words, God's realm, God's presence, God's kingdom is never farther away than this <<reach out arm to grasp at arm's length>> and sometimes much, much closer, if we'd only be open to it.

If our focus is elsewhere, out there, we can too easily miss what is happening right in front of us.

If we're only scanning the horizon, we can miss what's at our feet.

In waiting for a spectacular, Technicolor, surround sound coming of the Kingdom on the last day, we can all too easily miss God's grace and presence in our everyday lives, today.

The Kingdom of Heaven isn't some kind of future escape. It's a present reality. God is present in the world. In a smile, or an embrace, or a kind word. In the beauties of creation. In the hearts of his people gathered together in his name. In a piece of bread and a cup of wine.

God is active in the world. Look for his presence. Be open to his grace and love. The Kingdom of God is with you, and among you, and in you. Keep your eyes open. Stay alert. And don't overlook it.

May God's Kingdom come, may God's will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.