Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN

I don’t know why time-change Sundays are always such a big deal for me. I don’t care whether it’s the Spring, when we’re losing an hour, or the Fall, when we’re gaining back that hour, these weekends always discombobulate me completely. You should’ve seen me last evening. Already around 8 P.M., I turned my watch back an hour, worrying that I might not be up at the right time this morning. Then before I went to bed, I scurried through the house, trying to remember which clocks need to be adjusted, and which ones adjust themselves. I can never remember whether my bedside clock is one of those or not, so throughout the night, I keep waking up, looking with one sleepy eye at the alarm clock’s glowing digits, and then tapping on my cellphone to compare its time with the one on the clock, since I know the cellphone can be trusted to switch over. And then I go back to fitful sleep, until that moment when both clocks coincide, and I can relax. And this happens in both seasons, even though in the Fall I don’t really have to worry about oversleeping on a Sunday morning!

Part of it is the anticipation of seeing how, in one night, the whole course of the day seems to be altered. All day today, I’ll be thinking about nightfall, and how different it will seem, with darkness seemingly coming so early. And tomorrow morning, I’ll marvel that it’s suddenly lighter out when I take the dog out. It shifts your whole perception of the day, doesn’t it? And for at least a couple of weeks, my body will not have adapted itself to the change, and I’ll keep following the old patterns and rhythms that my body has become accustomed to. Yet we know that the day really hasn’t changed at all. The earth is still spinning at exactly the same rate, the sun still rises and sets according to the same pattern it has followed since the dawn of time…it has its own reality, separate and apart from us. What changes is our perception of that reality, what changes is how we measure it, how we grasp it. But still, it fascinates me that it seems so different, simply because of what we humans call it, how we define it.

Today’s scriptures touch on this subject of a reality that exists independent of our human perceptions. In that amazing passage from the Sermon on the Mount that we call the Beatitudes, Jesus says over and over again, “Blessed are…,” “happy are….” Present tense. It’s funny, we hear those words, and we always want to understand them in terms of some far-off future, and a future that will be off someplace else, in some far-away heaven. I think our perception is thrown off by Jesus’ use of that phrase, “theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” As soon as we hear that word “heaven,” our minds shift to life after death, our perceptions shift it off to another time and another place. And we think that blessedness, that happiness, are things that are only attained after death, as a reward for being or doing those things that Jesus describes. If we become meek, then we will be happy. If we are merciful, then we will receive God’s mercy. And so it all becomes a reward system—in other words, become these things while you’re alive on earth, and you will get extra rewards after you die.

But it’s important to understand that when the gospel of Matthew talks about “the kingdom of heaven,” it’s a euphemism. Observant Jews of that day, and even today, avoid very carefully using the name of God in speech. You may have seen Jewish friends who write “God” with a dash in place of the “o” to avoid writing the sacred name. Orthodox Jews will sometimes say “HaShem”—literally, “the Name”—to refer to God, or in reading scripture, when the proper name for God, YHWH, appears, they will substitute “Adonai”—the LORD—to avoid uttering the name too holy to be uttered. So in the gospel of Matthew, written primarily for an audience of Jewish believers, when Jesus says, “the kingdom of heaven,” he’s not referring to a disembodied plane of existence that we call “heaven,” that we will go to when we die, he’s simply saying “the kingdom of God.”

And when Jesus talks about the kingdom of God, he is always talking about the kingdom of God being “at hand,” or “among you.” In other words, the kingdom of God is not something that is a reward after we die, the kingdom of God is a reality that is already being revealed among us, is a reality that is breaking into our world. The problem is our perception, or lack of perception, of that reality. God’s reign exists separate and apart from our perception of it.
And when Jesus talks about eternal life, he’s not just talking about something we gain after death, he’s talking about a life that has already begun, a life that we’re already living, whether we realize it or not, and it’s a life that is lived in that kingdom of justice and mercy and righteousness that is the kingdom of God. It’s a life where the things we humans perceive as most valued turn out not to be the things that God values. It’s a world where those who aren’t the “top dogs” turn out to be the leading citizens. It’s a world where those who mourn their losses have the assurance of being comforted in their loss. It’s a world where those who don’t think of themselves as being “spiritual giants” are the ones who have their spiritual longings fulfilled. It’s a world where those who practice mercy live in reciprocity with others. And Jesus says that it’s a world that is already here at hand, already among us—we just need eyes to perceive it. And once we have eyes and ears and hearts that are opened to perceive this reality of a kingdom of heaven that is already arriving, we begin to see it everywhere. Even suffering, even loss, even persecution is transformed. And we begin to adjust our lives and our behaviors to the reality we now perceive.

But the kingdom is not fully realized among us just yet. One sign of this was an article I read this week by a guy named Steve Siebold, that appeared in Business Insider, headlined, “Most people shouldn’t be giving to charity.” In it, he attacks charitable giving, saying, “We’re taught in church to tithe 10% of all that we earn. Children are encouraged to hit up their neighbors to raise funds for the school through the sales of chocolate candy bars. Police fraternal organizations, political parties, and others call us each evening asking for money. And while giving back is a wonderful thing to do, and sounds like a spirit-driven, high-level philosophy, it’s the worst advice you can get. When you fly on a commercial airline, the first thing the flight attendant tells the passengers is, ‘In case of an emergency, your oxygen mask will drop down in front of you. Please secure your mask first and get the oxygen flowing before you attempt to help anyone else, including children.’ This selfish strategy has saved many lives, and the premise is simple: If you’re not taking care of you, you’re not in a position to help anyone else.” This is so far from the values of the kingdom of God…but then we open our eyes and see those saints around us who are giving generously of their time and resources for the good of their neighbor, and we remember those saints in our lives who grasped the kingdom values, and we can glimpse and grasp a reality that exists beyond our earth-bound perceptions.

And the Good News is that God’s good reign is breaking in. The Good News is that we already are the children of God, we don’t have to wait for that, and while we may not yet perceive exactly what that means for us now, and what it will mean, we have the assurance that that reality will be revealed to us, and that ultimately it will mean that we will be like God, because we will see God in God’s fullness. And the Good News is that eternal life has already begun for us, and that those we have known and loved continue to enjoy that life. It’s all in how we perceive it.

Rob Bell, in his book Love Wins, says this: “Sometimes when Jesus uses the word ‘heaven’ he simply is referring to God. Sometimes, he is referring to the future coming together of heaven and earth in what he and his contemporaries called life in the age to come. And sometimes, he was talking about our present eternal, intense, real experiences of joy, peace and love in this life, this side of death and the age to come.” In other words, heaven isn’t “someday,” it is a present reality. Jesus blurs the lines between the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God, and invites us into the merging of heaven and earth, of future/present, in the here and now. As Pr. Bell says, “Eternal life is less about a kind of time that starts when we die, and more about a quality and vitality of life lived now in connection to God. It doesn’t start when we die, it starts now. It’s not about a life that begins at death, it’s about experiencing the kind of life now that can endure and survive even death. Jesus invites us, in this life, in this broken, beautiful world, to experience the life of heaven now. He insisted over and over that God’s peace, joy, and love are currently available to us, exactly as we are. There’s heaven now, somewhere else. There’s heaven here, sometime else. And then there’s Jesus’ invitation to heaven here and now, in this moment in this place.” Thanks be to God. AMEN