“***The Kingdom Within***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Oct. 6, 2019

**Lamentations 3:19–26**

19 The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall!
20 My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.
 21 But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:

22 The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end;
23 they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.
 24 “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.”

25 The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.
26 It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

**Luke 17:20–23**

20Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; 21nor will they say, “Look, here it is!” or “There it is!” For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within\* you.” 22Then he said to the disciples, “The days are coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. 23They will say to you, ‘Look there!’ or ‘Look here!’ Do not go, do not set off in pursuit.” *[\*“within”– King James and ASV]*

Once again we have two *very* different Scriptures. Lamentations, true to its name, starts out with sorrow, affliction, and feeling bowed down. Perhaps the author is worried that the sorrow will never end. But then he recalls the steadfast love of God. Steadfast love is one of the most spiritually important words in the Old Testament, the word *chesed*, sometimes translated lovingkindness. In another famous passage, it is translated mercy: “to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic 6:8 NIV).

Here, our author says “his mercies never end; they are new every morning . . . . The Lord is my portion, therefore I will hope in him” (Lam 3:22–24). This hope does not bring immediate gratification; rather, it brings a holy *waiting*: “It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord” (3:26). Adopting this attitude has an almost miraculous result: one actually starts to feel the fulfillment of one’s seeking. Within the quiet of reflection, he sees the truth of God. The Holy Quiet is filled with the taste of God. It is a *watchful* waiting, an eagerness pinned to certitude that good will come. The key is to trust, and to wait without anxiety. Now, I can’t control my anxiety by *thinking* about controlling it. Rather, I think about something that fills me with surprise and joy, and the anxiety is just gone! I am absorbed, even *thrilled*, by the beautiful words “The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him” (3:25). I find that if I take that truth to heart, the truth warms my heart, and these words become a self-fulfilling prophecy. *Seeking* is the beginning of *finding* because, after all, God is present.

I am approaching the passage mystically, which means *experientially*—nothing magical or strange. I just mean approaching it *receptively*, with holy quiet, while seeking God. That approach makes this passage close to the Jesus saying: “the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21). Jesus is talking about experiencing God within.

I have given the traditional translation of this passage, correctly translating the word *entos* as “within.” Many recent translations say the kingdom is “among” you (NRSV), or “in your midst” (NIV). Frankly, I think these choices are politically correct, rather than accurate. Some scholars think “within you” sounds too individualistic, and they want to replace it with a more *social* teaching, but the traditional translation is correct. He really does say that the kingdom of God is *within* you. So *both* of our biblical passages are about personal religious experience.

Everybody’s personal experience is going to be unique. There is one God, but each person’s *experience* of God is going to be different. If I came down and held up a jewel for you to look at, what would you see? Someone on one side of the room might see some internal surfaces, like window panes, with a light that becomes bluer around the edges of the panes. From a different angle you might see a brighter yellowish color, like sunlight. Another could see bands of color, a rainbow of blue, green, orange, pink. It’s the same jewel, but everyone sees something different in it. Yet all the views are real. So also, your personal religious experience will differ from mine, yet with some similarities. What I want to emphasize here is not so much the different details as the unique *angle* that *you* have, which will be your personal angle. Not only are you seeking God, God is seeking your unique contribution.

So also, your waiting for God will be part of your *intimate* and personal experience of God. And again I say, seeking is the beginning of finding. To seek God’s will, or to seek to know the truth about Jesus, is already to begin discovering the truth. There is a God-receiver within you that resonates when truth comes near; your spirit picks up transmissions from the Truth Source. That’s one of the things Jesus means by saying “the kingdom of God is within you.” We all have an inner God-receiver that responds to spiritual truth and goodness. We can develop responsiveness to our inner guide. We can see more and more of the jewel, and learn more about God.

We have to be *discerning*, however. We need to avoid being misled here or there by this or that false prophet. So, although we have an inner guide, we need *more*. We need mental discipline and experiential wisdom, in order to not be manipulated by those who take advantage of spiritually receptive people. Instead, you need to nurture your “discernment of spirits,” as Paul says in 1 Cor 12:10. That’s part of your personal story, too: your learning to discern and reject counterfeits. You *have* the kingdom of God, but build up some ramparts of wisdom and discernment, some defenses.

So our Scriptures today tell us to wait in holy quiet, for the quiet is full of God, and it is our personal experience of God. Remember that seeking is the beginning of finding. We have so much power and potential within us, that Jesus calls it the kingdom of God. But we still need wisdom. We need to be wise as serpents, and harmless as doves (Matt 10:16).