

Attention and the Kingdom of God

If you have been reading these blogposts, you may be familiar with the function of attention and its importance to the wiring of the mind. If attention is the mind's ignition key, what does that have to do with "the kingdom of God is at hand," as Jesus proclaimed so often? I recently heard a sermon on the coming of the kingdom of God. The speaker indicated that with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the reign of God has been declared, and that peace, justice, and mercy are now the order of the day. Excuse me? Order of the day? "Of what day, and of whose universe are you speaking?" I wanted to ask. On most days, the evidence for the emergence of God's kingdom seems to be quite thin, especially given the depth of the pain of those who walk into my office, let alone what I read in the paper. However, when I am confronted with the evidence from neuroscience—God's own creation—about how and to what we pay attention, I realize that rather than me questioning the claims of the gospel narratives that announce that God now reigns fully in Jesus, those very narratives are actually confronting me. Among many questions put to me, a most challenging one is, "To what are you paying attention?" At once I realize that my answers are embarrassingly naive and parroted. I pay attention to what I read and watch in the media. I pay attention to what "they" say (despite there really being no "they"). I try to pay attention to the comments of those wiser than I (but ineffectively put them into practice). But mostly I pay attention to the sensations, images, feelings, and thoughts in my mind that weave their way into the story that becomes my life. And often that story is fueled by the broken, wounded parts of my memory (that include the effects of generations of people that have preceded me) that have automatically wired God and his kingdom right out of the picture. And so, perhaps the reason I don't see God's kingdom the way Jesus and subsequently his followers did, is not because it isn't there, but because I'm not paying attention to it. Perhaps the kingdom's "absence" has more to do with my not attuning to God's story of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control; and my distraction from beauty and depth than with their true nonexistence. No wonder that anxiety is the energizing undercurrent of my life when my attention is ultimately focused, albeit at times quite non-consciously, on the fear of being left alone rather than on the presence of a Father who is intimately with me, never leaving me, and pleased that I am on the earth. To what, moment by moment, are you paying attention? When we attune less to our old story and more to God's new story and our place in it, God enables us to, like the sentinels of Isaiah 52, "see in plain sight the return of the Lord." If we become good at what we practice, perhaps practicing seeing the kingdom of God would be a good place to start.