

November 21, 2021

“A Kingdom Not From Here”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

John 18:33-37

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With Thanksgiving just a few days away, I think most of us here realize how blessed we really are; to live in this country with all our freedoms, for our families and friends, for our abundance, for our church John Wesley, for our fellow congregants whom we love and respect even though we may not always agree, and especially for the great God that we worship who loves us all. That's why I'd like to begin with a portion of Psalm 100, the very words Pilgrim leader William Bradford read upon first sighting land after their voyage from England that lasted a harrowing sixty-six days on a tiny vessel called the Mayflower. *Worship the Lord with gladness. Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us and we are his. Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him. Bless his name. For the Lord is good. His steadfast love endures forever and his faithfulness to all generations.*

Yes, we are thankful this day. Yet I suspect that even in the midst of our thankfulness, each and every one of us also struggles with some issue in our life. It could be our health, our children, an addiction. It could be financial concerns, depression, stress, or any number of other problems or situations. And our pain is real, the questions are large, and the answers don't come easily. But let's look to scripture and the words of the prophet Habakkuk. He says, “Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there is no fruit on the vines; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields produce no food; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, yet I will rejoice in the Lord! I will be joyful in the Lord of my salvation! The Sovereign Lord is my strength!” Now to put this in context, these words were written in the midst of some of the darkest times the Israelite people had ever experienced. The Babylonian army was about to invade. They would be dispersed, enslaved and even killed. And yet, the prophet reminds them, and us, that our faith, our trust, our hope is not based on what we have in this world, or what happens to us in this world, because all this is temporary, fleeting, shallow. Rather, our faith and trust and hope is based on God – who is eternal, who is sovereign, who rules over a kingdom that, as Christ said today, is “not from here.”

The Kingdom of God. It's interesting that when Jesus began his public ministry, one of the first things he preached was, “The Kingdom of God is near. Repent of your sins and turn to God.” And from that time on, Jesus establishes himself as one in authority, one who is sovereign and rules over even the winds and the waves. One who is Lord of all! And indeed, throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus called

“Lord” by many of his followers. And he even claimed that title of authority. He told his disciples, “You call me Teacher and Lord, and that is what I am.” But here’s the thing. When the Romans controlled the civilized world, Caesar alone was to be referred to as Lord, King, Emperor. Caesar was the one to whom all allegiance was owed. And by saying that Jesus is Lord, you were challenging Caesar's authority and all the powers and establishments that operated under his name. So it's not too surprising that St. Paul spent much of his ministry in jail for hailing Jesus as Lord, or that all the apostles with the exception of John, were martyred. And that for three centuries the followers of the “Lord” Jesus Christ were killed or persecuted. And, of course, it's the main reason Christ himself was crucified.

We see that in today’s scripture, because this confrontation between Pilate and Jesus is to determine Jesus’ fate. It brings to climax the matter of God's sovereignty and lordship. “Are you the King of the Jews?” Pilate asks Jesus. If Jesus says yes, then that is treason, punishable by death. There’s a bit of a terse exchange between them and Jesus answers back, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” Pilate probably had no clue what Jesus was talking about. What land, what people was Jesus proclaiming to be king over? Typically, when we think of a king and his kingdom in this world, we tend to think of a large territory and a body of people controlled by a leader who is sometimes benevolent, but more often flawed in many, many ways. Which, if truth be told, so are the people of the kingdom. Just look at the history of the world for proof. Just look at how our world today is so out of step with God's intentions. It’s a place where power and selfishness and violence hold sway. But the kingdom, the world that Jesus is alluding to, is the one God created in the first place, and that he sustains even today with his love. It is the world God so loved, so loved, that he sent his only Son into it, to die for it.

So what exactly is this Kingdom of God? Well, the Gospels are full of illustrations about it. Parables that begin with...the Kingdom of God is like. The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, so small and yet it grows into a tree so large and strong that, as King David once said, touches the sky, and is visible to the ends of the earth, it's leaves beautiful and its fruit abundant and under it wild animals find shelter and birds nest in its branches and from it every creature is fed. The Kingdom of God is like a pearl that is so magnificent, so beautiful, so valuable, that a merchant sells everything he owns just to have it. The Kingdom of God is like the king who has compassion and lavishly forgives his servant the large debt

that he owes. There are stories. The Kingdom of God is like the father or mother who never gives up on their confused or hurting or wayward child. The Kingdom of God is like a rich man who gave a wedding feast and invited everyone, including the poor, the stranger, people on the margin, people who are different. Yes, there are so many wonderful parables and stories and sayings about what the Kingdom of God is like.

I think we see all these dynamics come into play in an often overlooked story from St. Luke's gospel where Jesus is betrayed and about to be arrested. "When his disciples saw what was coming, they asked, 'Lord should we strike with the sword?' Then one of them struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, 'No more of this!' And he touched the servant's ear and healed him." You see, in the kingdoms of this world, there is always an "us versus them" mentality - like in Kenosha, Wisconsin. An us versus them mentality which inevitably results in harm – division, hostility, injustice. But Jesus shows us the Kingdom of God, which, when suffering harm, will, in return, offer healing. Think about that: harm versus healing. I think this little story so beautifully represents what we heard Jesus say, "That my kingdom, the kingdom of God, is not of this world." No, it isn't. The Kingdom of God is state of order, a state of being, that is totally "in step" with the original intentions of our Almighty God. It is a kingdom where there is grace instead of judgment, peace instead of anger, compassion instead of indifference, forgiveness instead of condemnation, unity instead of division, and where love guides all actions. Like in this place. The Kingdom of God is where, despite those issues and problems we have in this world, we can say with the prophet, "I will rejoice in the Lord. I will be joyful in the Lord of my salvation!" Isn't that the kingdom you want to belong to?

That is why we celebrate Christ the King Sunday. Because we can once again affirm our allegiance to Jesus Christ our Lord. Why? Because he is Christ the King. He is the Messiah – the Savior – Emmanuel, God with us. He is the Word made flesh – the firstborn of all creation – and the firstborn of the dead. Jesus! He's the One who is and was and is to come. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. He is the Son of God and the Son of Man. He is Wonderful Counselor – Mighty God – Everlasting Father – and the Prince of Peace. He is Alpha and Omega – the beginning and the end – the resurrection and the life. He is the great I AM. He is the bread of life – the living water – the light of the world – the true vine to which we cling – the cornerstone of our faith and the gate through which we are saved. He is the way – the truth – the life – He is the judge of the living and the dead. He is the author of our life, the source of our hope and the deliverer of our souls. He is the Lamb of God, He is the King of heaven, and He is the Head of the Church.

He is our redeemer – our rock – our righteousness – our advocate – our protector and our friend. He is salvation to the sinner – eyes to the blind – ears to the deaf – compassion to the hurting – companion to the lonely and strength to the weak. His love knows no bounds – his peace passes all understanding – his mercy goes beyond measure and in Him our joy is made complete. He is the one who calms our storms – dries our tears – heals our wounds – relieves our fears – forgives our sins and renews our soul. He is unparalleled – unprecedented – unmatched - unsurpassed. He is indescribable – incomparable – irresistible – irreplaceable. He stands alone in history – he is the doctrine of true theology – he is the mind no man can grasp. He is Christ the King. Christ the King! And to him be the true kingdom and the power and the glory forever and forever and forever. Amen. Amen.