

## **WHEN THE KINGDOM WILL COME**

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, November 25, 2018  
based on Mark 1:14–15; Acts 1:3–8***

Today is Christ the King Sunday, the culmination of the church liturgical year. Beginning with Advent, which starts next Sunday, the church year tracks the story of Jesus, from his promised coming (our focus during Advent) to the birth of Jesus at Christmas, through the seasons of Epiphany and Lent to the victory of Easter, then continuing on to the coming of the Holy Spirit and the season of Pentecost. The cycle comes to its climax today—on Christ the King Sunday—which celebrates the enthronement of Christ in glory, and the good news that Christ now reigns on the throne of heaven.

If there is a king, there is also a kingdom. The gospel of Mark reports that the early preaching of Jesus can be encapsulated in his saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the good news.” (Mark 1:15) Jesus would continue to talk about the kingdom of God, more than about any other subject. What he was saying has enormous importance for us. So this morning we are beginning a new sermon series, which will continue to the first Sunday of January, entitled, “The Kingdom Is at Hand.” {prayer}

There is general agreement among people today that the world is a mess. People disagree as to what to do about it, but there is hardly anyone who thinks that everything is perfectly fine just the way it is. People everywhere have a sense that there is a lot that is wrong in the way things are among human beings.

Some people argue that all the wrongs in the world are an indication that there simply is no God, that we are just the result of random physical processes producing this oftentimes amoral world. But if that is the case, then why would we think that the world ought to be different? If we are simply the product of forces of chance, we should accept a brutal, chaotic world as a given. Yet people universally think that the world ought to be better, that humanity has gotten off track from where we should be.

But to think this way is to believe that the world somehow is intended to be perfected from where it is. Where would we get that idea—that there is some sort of greater intention for things? Why do we think that humanity should rise to a higher calling? Where does that higher calling—that sense that we are meant for something more—come from? If we are only material beings in a meaningless universe, we should be satisfied to live in a world full of mayhem; but we are not. We all have a profound inner awareness that we as human beings are destined to achieve a better world.

This only makes sense when we recognize that we have been created by God, who gives us that calling to create a world of goodness and right. We have a feeling that we have gotten off track because in various ways we have fallen from God’s intention for us. We have a belief that the world ought to be better because that is God’s design for the world. In our perception that we are being drawn toward something greater we are connecting with God’s

purpose for us and for the whole world.

When the Bible pictures the way the world should be, it often uses the image of a kingdom—not a typical earthly kingdom with a highly flawed king, but a realm of righteousness and peace in which God’s perfect rule holds in human hearts and minds. Such a picture is found, for example, in the prophet Isaiah when he says:

“In days to come the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains; peoples shall stream to it and say: ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” (Isaiah 2:2–4)

Isaiah went on to declare that this reign of God’s righteousness and peace would finally be established through a coming king, who would fulfill God’s promise to David that his throne would be established forever, and who would usher in that kingdom in which God’s principles of goodness and peace would hold sway in human lives. As he said,

“Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called ‘Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.’ Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore.” (Isaiah 9:6–7)

This image of a coming kingdom is reiterated in later prophets. In the book of Daniel, for example, Daniel interprets a dream in which various flawed earthly kingdoms arise, one after another, but then they are transcended by a divinely established kingdom that will be forever. Daniel proclaimed, “In those days the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed.” (Daniel 2:44)

This trajectory comes to its culmination in Jesus, when he declares, “The time is fulfilled. The Kingdom of God is at hand.” (Mark 1:15)

From the prophets it is clear that the kingdom of God is far more than the usual change in who is running the government. The kingdom of God is that condition in which the world is becoming what it is meant to be. It is the situation in which God’s purposes for human life—that we would live in harmony with God and with one another, in wholeness and in peace—are becoming reality. But exactly when and how does this kingdom arrive?

When Jesus says, “The Kingdom of God is at hand,” it could also be translated, “The Kingdom of God has drawn near.” The Greek verb here is ἐγγίζω *engidzo*, which expresses extreme closeness. Many of the people who first heard Jesus thought that this closeness was a matter of timing. They expected that the arrival of God’s kingdom would mean a literal replacement of the lousy government of Rome with a new regime; and they imagined that what Jesus was saying was that this was going to happen at any moment.

Such an idea was very exciting, for it meant that all the people had to do was to sit back, and pretty soon God would bulldoze the Romans away and set up an ideal government. This sort of thinking persisted among many people throughout the ministry of Jesus, even though it did not correspond with the actual teaching of Jesus. When Jesus came into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the people waved palm branches and acclaimed Jesus as king because they thought he was about to set up that new earthly kingdom. People turned against Jesus when it turned out this was not his plan. But after his resurrection, when the Risen Jesus appeared to his followers, some of them thought that perhaps now was the time, and they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6)

Jesus answered them, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by His own authority.” (Acts 1:7) This was basically an instruction to them to stop thinking of the coming of the kingdom in terms of timing. Nevertheless, people have persisted in thinking in this way. You may remember a few years ago when billboards appeared in Akron and around the country proclaiming the end of the world as we know it and the final arrival of God’s eternal kingdom on May 21, 2011. The billboards were put up by Harold Camping, one of many end-times preachers who have appeared over the years and who have claimed that they have figured out God’s timetable. You can find lots of examples of this sort of “end-times prophecy” on the airwaves and the internet. The expectation that God is about to wipe out the evil of this world and establish a bright eternal rule has always had a certain attraction to it, because it would mean, just as it did in the first century, that all we need to do is to sit back, and wait for God to roar in and set up a whole new system. The normal expectation is that God is going to blast away all the evil people in the world with fire and brimstone, and bring the good people, who of course would be us, into a new kingdom. But this expectation never works out. The end-times preachers must perpetually revise their dates; Harold Camping produced a whole series of judgment day dates until he finally gave up. The problem is that people are ignoring Jesus’ words when he said, “It is not for you to know the time.” But even more, the problem is that people are misunderstanding what Jesus was saying about how the kingdom arrives.

Jesus began his announcement about the Kingdom by saying, “The time is fulfilled.” (Mark 1:15) There are two Greek words for time. One is the word, *chronos*, which indicates chronological time, the ticking of the clock. This is the sort of time that end-of-the-world preachers are always talking about; they want to say that the end-times clock is ticking and is almost at the alarm. But this is not the word for time in this verse.

The other Greek word for time is *kairos*. It indicates the moment of significant opportunity or action, such as when we might say, “Now is the time to renovate the sanctuary organ.” This is the word translated “time” in this verse in Mark. Jesus was saying, “Something momentous is happening which creates for you an opportunity for action.”

Then he says, “The Kingdom of God is at hand”—or close. Now he is talking not about

God's timing but about God's presence. The kingdom of God has come near because God has come among us in Jesus. The kingdom is close because the Lord is now close to us. Jesus expressed this when he put his saying about the kingdom another way and said, "The kingdom of God is among you," or it could be translated "The kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:21) And this creates an opportunity for action—for us to open ourselves to the presence of God right now to become a part of what God is doing. So Jesus immediately goes on to say, "Repent, and believe the gospel." (Mark 1:15) To repent is to turn wholeheartedly to God, and to "believe" means not just to believe an idea but to receive God's saving power and put our trust in God.

The kingdom of God—that condition in which human life in this world becomes what it is meant to be—arrives, not through the toppling of a government someplace, and not through God bringing down the curtain on world history. The kingdom arrives as people respond in faith to God's coming to us in Jesus Christ, opening themselves to God's grace and God's action to empower us with the Holy Spirit. This is clear in that passage from Acts, where Jesus' followers had asked whether this was the time when Jesus would establish his kingdom. Jesus told them to stop thinking about supernatural timetables and start thinking about their own opportunity for faith and action; he said to them, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8) In other words, the kingdom would progressively arrive as Jesus' followers, transformed by His grace and enabled by His Spirit, would commit themselves in faith to bear witness to God's truth and grace to the world around them.

This connects very much with how God works throughout the Biblical story. God continually gives people a vision for how human life should be—through the laws in Old Testament days to the people of Israel to the full revelation of God's design in Jesus. God does not impose this on people from on high, but invites people to freely respond to God, so that people might become a part of the unfolding of God's purposes. In the first century, many people rightfully perceived that there was much that was wrong about the Roman Empire; but God's answer to that was not to obliterate Rome and drop something new from heaven. God's answer was to call people to join in mission for Christ; and by their witness they ultimately transformed the empire.

This is how God works today. God's kingdom progressively unfolds as we respond in faith, and engage in witness and service for Christ. This means, of course, that the advance of God's kingdom is always a gradual thing, which is why Jesus once described it by saying that "the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which, though small, when it grows becomes large." (Matthew 13:31–32) This also means that the kingdom is always incomplete on earth because there is always more growth to go. Sometimes people are unsatisfied with this scenario. They wish that God would just wipe out evil from the earth and make a fresh start. But if God cleared out all the sinners, we would be among the ones cleared out. It is the

patience of God, and the willingness of God to allow for human imperfection, which provides the space for human redemption, including our own.

So it is clear when the kingdom comes. The kingdom of God comes for each of us when we give our highest allegiance to Christ as king; for then the reign of God can take hold in us—we come to know God’s love for us, we begin to reflect more and more God’s design for human life, and we become a part of creating that better world that God intends for humanity. We will not arrive at the fullness of the kingdom until we arrive in heaven, and share in full glory of God’s reign. But when Jesus instructed his disciples to pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10), it was a clear message to us that we are to be the points through which God’s kingdom is breaking into the world right now.

There are always people who will look at what a mess the world is and conclude that the problem is God; they blame God and then either disbelieve in God or turn from God. Others consider the problem to be the existing government; and since our government always produces plenty of imperfections and blunders, there is no end to the blame that can be put on the government. But the Bible shows that the fundamental problem is our own human sinfulness, that all of us have strayed from God and fallen short of God’s design. The answer is given to us in Jesus Christ, who would bring us out of our sin into a lifegiving relationship with God wherein we become a part of setting the whole world aright. Now is the time for us—to acclaim Christ as our King, so that his rule can unfold through our lives, and we can go forth to be his witnesses in our own community and to the ends of the earth.