

The Kingdom of the Beloved  
Colossians 1.11-20  
November 20, 2016  
Christ the King + 118th Anniversary  
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It's a peculiar thing to stand here on the final Sunday of the church year, the week before we begin anticipating the birth of Jesus, and herald the church's truth: Christ is King. The way I think about God and Spirit and Christ tends to cozy up most comfortably to the servant, son, gardener language we encounter in the Easter season. King and throne and kingdom aren't the immediate images that speak to me, though "the kingdom of God is a governing motif of the NT, with the term itself appearing well over a hundred times."<sup>1</sup> However, this year I'm drawn to the kingdom language and the notion of what it means to be people of a kingdom we cannot see looking to King Jesus as the image of the invisible God.

Hebrew scripture speaks of kingdom, too, and obviously in a way that is tied quite literally to human kingship and not just divine. But we know that throughout these sacred texts, there are other kingdoms ruling. There is the kingdom of Egypt: oppressive, powerful, making slaves of humans, comfortable in amassing tremendous wealth while innocent people suffer. And the ways of this first human kingdom we encounter are the opposite of God's ways. Where Egypt crushes and captures, God lifts up and frees. Passages in Exodus and I Chronicles describe Israel's God as a warrior, fighting for God's people, and a divine ruler who will reign forever and ever.

And the response of this divine ruler is not to turn around and abuse his own followers. Instead, the divine ruler commands them to remember. Do not forget how this human kingdom treats people made in the image of God. Remember you were slaves once there. Remember that I freed you. Remember that I am calling you to a different life. Remember that you, and each and every person you meet, have been made in the image of God.

And the human response is a flurry of gratitude for what God has done followed by a long span of amnesia. We forget. We forget what God has done. We forget what God has called us to do. We forget who God has called us to be. We forget that our allegiance is to the ways of God and not the ways of human kingdoms. And our loyalty

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<sup>1</sup> *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery: "Kingdom of God/Kingdom of Heaven"* (pp. 478-481); used throughout today's sermon

and trust shifts back to the powers of this world. The people of ancient Israel, just like us today, forget the message of kingdom and begin to act and fight and govern and chase power in the same ways. But God whispers to us, "Remember!" Because God hasn't called God's people to be like Egypt.

And then the people of Israel encounter another great human kingdom, Babylon. And just as human kingdoms are wont to do, Babylon overpowers, divides, oppresses, captures, separates. Babylon chases power and amasses wealth without regard for human story. Babylon doesn't honor Israel's God or Israel's ways. Babylon destroys sacred spaces leaving nothing familiar, and Israel finds herself in exile.

Then Israel begins to remember. And prophets rise up with urges to turn and return to the God who saw and heard God's people when they were once slaves in Egypt. God is not speaking to the powers of Babylon, God is speaking to the exiles. God goes right into the heart of the fear and uses the prophets' voices to bring comfort and peace. In exile, far from a geographical home, far from a familiar temple, far from the human comforts that tell us we are okay because we are in control, God's kingdom still exists. The prophet Isaiah sends word to those who are far from home, "Your God reigns!"

We glimpse again that the kingdom of God has different priorities than the kingdoms of earth. The divine impulse is to see those on the bottom, to those whose lives have been shattered, to those whom the powerful exploit and ignore, to speak straight to the suffering and fear and isolation that human kingdoms too often create. God sees, hears, and then calls out with words of assurance, hope, and promise that there will be a different way. Because God hasn't called God's people to be like Babylon.

When we come to Jesus, we encounter yet another human kingdom, this time Rome. There is corruption at every political level, even the tax collectors take a cut for themselves before passing Rome's exploitative fees onto the highest level of government. And Jesus challenges his religion's comfort with the human kingdom of Rome. In the stories we have before us, snapshots of 1st century religious life in Israel, we find images of good people of faith just like us who are benefiting from the comforts of the human kingdom that rules over them. And those comforts have infiltrated their faith practice in ways that Jesus knows are not in line with God's ways. Like Rome, their ways have also become exclusive. Their ways also prioritize rich over poor. Their ways also value appearance and performance above integrity and valuing all human life.

And we find in Jesus' teaching a fervent call back to the kingdom of God. Jesus reminds his followers, "If God is king, then Caesar is not." That is to say, what you are being told about the culture around you is wrong-headed. It's not in line with who God is. And for those who believe in God's ways, the Spirit's movement, and Jesus' steps, there simply is no way to line our lives up with Caesar. Jesus shows us what this kingdom looks like in his ministry of seeing and hearing all kinds of people. Question the borders that divide us from them. He's forever at a table eating and talking, teaching and praying, breaking bread and passing the best wine.

The images in his sermons are threatening to religious establishment and Rome alike because he tells his followers to question every divide and every rule that is keeping them compliant, separate, and allegedly safe. Meet with refugees and immigrants. Dine with women and men whose reputations will threaten your own. Welcome and bless and restore no matter what's in it for you—whether they worship the same God you do or not, whether they join you on the path joyfully or walk away sad—be about the kingdom of God. Give Rome what Rome asks for and then get back to the work and ways of God's invisible, mysterious, hidden, subversive, and forever reigning kingdom. Jesus invites us to follow him over and over and over again. Because God hasn't called God's people to be like Rome.

In Paul's letter today, we hear the invitation again to be swept up into the kingdom of God's beloved, Jesus. He is the image of God, he shows us what God is like, he shows us God's path and ways and steps. He shows us that God is not found in Egypt or Babylon or Rome. He shows us that God is starkly different from these powers and principalities, and we have been transferred from the human kingdoms we know into the divine kingdom we only glimpse.

Professor of New Testament Mariam Kamell encourages us to read the opening of Colossians as a whole rather than the half-prayer we are reading today. In doing so, we realize that Paul is calling the church to live as people of this kingdom of the beloved. "By inviting us into [God's] kingdom," she writes, "we are partners and co-inheritors of all things made right, and so we should work for justice and the righting of wrongs; we should work for peace and reconciliation, but we do these things because we know that all of this will be done in Christ."<sup>2</sup> Paul calls his friends onto the path of Jesus the beloved "so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God." (Colossians 1.9)

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1849](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1849)

And so here we sit, residents of a human kingdom. Sure, we don't call it that. We don't call it empire, either, though most certainly it is. From childhood, we're raised into this culture with a great affection for this country, we honor the remarkable freedoms we have here and the great experiment of democracy. But I don't stand here as a democratically elected representative of our nation today. I stand here in this peculiar robe in this space we have named sacred in a role ordained by friends and family who named something in me that sets me, undeservingly as it may be, in the line of the ones who call out: Remember.

God hasn't called God's people to be like Egypt. God hasn't called God's people to be like Babylon. God hasn't called God's people to be like Rome. And friends, even with every good thing we know to be true here, God hasn't even called God's people to be like the United States. God's kingdom is different. God's ways are different. God rules above all the leaders of the world, even the current president and the president-elect. The challenge is to remember who God is and who God has created us to be. Do not be absorbed by the broken ways of human kingdoms. Do not be absorbed by invitations to power that leave the weak behind. Do not be absorbed by the temptations of control and safety and greatness that are offered by flawed rulers of this world. Remember. Remember your God. Remember what we know of God through the life of Jesus. Remember you have been made in that image and no one else's.

That is what we are doing here in this place. We are not making good citizens of a human kingdom here. We are calling each other to something radical and different and truly other worldly. We are participating in the subversive act of remembering what the kingdoms of this world fight hard for us to forget. Friends, remember with me! Remember God's ways so well that when we see the ways of human kingdoms we can name what is wrong and opt out of participating and contributing to that brokenness. Remember God's ways so well that they are made visible in your life. Remember God's ways so fully and honestly that they grow and sprout in your days like fruit on a vine.

And so we call each other back onto this way on the final Sunday of our church year. We name this path we cannot fully see. We challenge each other to take the next step anyway. We call each other out of fear and hopelessness. We call each other more fully into the ways of Jesus' welcome, Jesus' peace, Jesus' powerful ways of seeing and hearing those the world dismisses. This is what we are about, my brothers and sisters. This is who we are at St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church. We are people of a kingdom that is already and not yet. We work together here for those values and those alone.

Today we renew our commitment to the St. Charles legacy, a congregation who for 118 years has pushed back against the standards of this world when the story of the culture

doesn't line up with the story of God. At the turn of the 20th century, honoring genuine, religious expression from different traditions and not forcing people to re-enter baptismal waters just to make them more like us. In the 1920s, welcoming women as equal members and voters and participants, calling them by their names and asking for their opinions as faithful lay leaders. Calling a pastor in the 1960s who was boldly and decidedly on the side of racial justice and equality. Welcoming and ordaining women to the diaconate and gospel ministries in the 1970s. Full inclusion of LGBT members through the 1980s and 90s. And in the 21st century, embracing marriage equality, and calling a woman to lead as senior pastor. This congregation has a legacy of growing into the ways of God on a surprising, ever-broadening, winding and curving path toward that divine kingdom.

We recommit ourselves today to asking good questions that make a difference in how we embrace truth and effect change. We recommit ourselves to seeking justice that the standards and realities of this world might slowly align with the ways of God's kingdom. We recommit ourselves to loving neighbors through the Spirit realities of kindness, patience, goodness, and gentleness. We recommit ourselves to welcoming all as beloved ones made in the image of God. We recommit ourselves to the task of remembering who God is and who God has shaped us to be. Because this is who we are as the people of God at St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church.