

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Alive in the Adventure of Jesus: The Kingdom Coming”
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Jeremiah 31:31-34, Mark 4:26-32

The clock was ticking. The hundred days had begun. Everyone was watching. Everyone was expectant. Millions were hopeful. Millions were angry that he had been elected. The problems were great. The solutions not obvious. He had to do something and do it soon. The pressure was on and he knew it. The question was, was Franklin Delano Roosevelt up to it? Could he bring the United States out of what was becoming the greatest depression the world had ever known? Oh, wait, you thought I was talking about President Trump? Well, not exactly, though I suppose I was, along with every other president of the modern era. They have all taken office faced with grave issues of war, unemployment and recession among them. The people have elected them believing that they could fix it; they could make the world better. And the newly elected presidents had to prove they were doing it...in their first hundred days. The pressure was on to do something; to bring about a better world.

In some ways this was the pressure that was on Jesus. As he was beginning his ministry he understood what the people were looking for. They were looking for the one who could do it; who could bring about the Kingdom of God, preferably in a hundred days. They were looking for the one with the right slogans and programs; the one with the power to make it happen to bring about God's amazing kingdom in which the Jewish people were free to live and worship, in which they once again actually had dominion over their enemies; in which everyone had enough; in which there was peace and prosperity. The pressure was on. Yet in a sense it did not seem to impact Jesus in the least. In fact, when he talked about the Kingdom of God, the images he offered were never images of waiting, rather than of action; of inactivity, rather than harried hurrying. The Kingdom of God is like seed that is planted and it grows in its own time and way. No one can hurry it. The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that grows, slowly into a bush that welcomes all sorts of creatures. This was not what the people wanted. They wanted action. They wanted results. The pressure was on.

What is fascinating to me about all of this is that the pressure faded; at least it faded in the church. At the birth of the church there was a real sense of urgency to build this amazing Kingdom. The earliest Christians lived in communities in which all was held in common. In which all people had enough. In which all people were taken care of. The earliest Christians also invited others into this community, believing that in so doing they were helping people prepare for the coming kingdom. Yet over time, when the Kingdom didn't get there; when the kingdom didn't get here, people went back to Jesus' teachings and realized that he had taken this long term view. He had seen the Kingdom coming as a future event, and not necessarily one in the present. So the church put the Kingdom on the back burner. They realized that they could not build it, that only God could build it, so why try. The church offered glimpses of the Kingdom in its architecture, great soaring cathedrals; it offered it in its liturgy, music, incense. But the real Kingdom, that was God's business. That was God's work. When God was ready the kingdom would come.

This same attitude is prevalent today. I recently watched a video in which a well-known pastor said that the only thing Christians were supposed to do was to tell people about Jesus. That we could not bring about the Kingdom so we were not to try. I have to say, in one respect I agree with him. I know this comes as a shock to many of you. The one respect is that we cannot create the Kingdom. We cannot change people's hearts to make them more loving and compassionate. We cannot create perfect economic systems in which everyone has enough. We cannot bring about peace between nations who have conflicting interests and needs. We cannot make fundamentalist Christians, Jews, Muslims and Hindus feel good about members of their faiths who do not believe the same way. In that sense then the pressure is off. It is off because ultimately only God can build the Kingdom. And if we listen to Jesus, God is doing this, but God is taking the long term view. The Kingdom is growing, we know not how, and one day it will arrive and be this amazing tree in which all of God's creatures come together as one. The Kingdom will be a home for all. That's where I agree. However, there is a place where I disagree.

The place where I disagree is that we should not do anything other than tell people about Jesus. Now let me be clear, should we tell people about Jesus? Absolutely. We are to tell them about the infinite love of Jesus that enfolds, sustains and empowers life. We are to tell them about the open arms that welcome all into Christ's community of love and grace. Yes, we are to tell. Yet, we are also supposed to be Kingdom people. We are to be people of love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness and compassion. We are to be people who share our resources with others. We are to be people who run our businesses with the highest ethical standards. We are to be people who treat others as we long to be treated. We are to be those who stand against injustice and oppression. We are to be the voice of the voiceless. In other words, we are to be those bright spots out in the world; those examples of what the coming Kingdom will look like. And we are to do this not merely because we should, or we ought, but because this is the essence of who we are. This is who we are as followers of Jesus Christ. We are those who have had God's law of love that Jeremiah was talking about, written onto our hearts. We are those who have been hard-wired to be Kingdom people.

A few minutes ago I said that the church tried to demonstrate what the Kingdom of God looked like through its architecture and its liturgy. This morning I want us to realize that we are to be the cathedrals and liturgy through which others see the Kingdom coming. We are to be those who are the light and love of God in the world. We are to be beacons of the Kingdom shining into a hurting world. In and through us, people are to see what the Kingdom looks like.

This morning as we hold our annual meeting, I want to say how proud I am to be your pastor; proud because when I look out at you I see the light shining. I see in what you do, in what we do, glimpses of the Kingdom coming. And even though we cannot create it, it is here; it is here in all that we have and are doing. My challenge to you this morning is this, to ask yourselves how am I being a light to the world, so that those around me can see the Kingdom coming in who I am and in what I do.