

This I Believe – The Time Has Come

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Mark 1:14-15

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Mark 1:14-15 (NRSV)

Let’s join together in prayer. *O God, open us up, open our eyes that we might see and open our ears that we might hear, open our hearts, God, that we might feel, and then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

I’ve shared with you all before that we have a place in Hempstead, Texas, for our family to gather; it’s a large group of folks. We have pasture land there, and we have some new inhabitants there. We have three new donkeys. They’re bigger than miniature donkeys; they call them big miniatures. They’re rescued and haven’t been around people at all. So, we haven’t actually touched them yet. They’re just wandering around in our neighbor’s pasture right now. They were named Willow, Zee, and Buck, but when we got them, we said to our grandson, “Hey, Land, we’ve got a new surprise for you,” he said, “What? Chips?” So, we’re going to name them Cheeto, Frito, and Dorito. That way, he’ll have new chips.

I thought we’d have a live demonstration. If you turn to the back, you’ll see the donkey. No, I’m just kidding. We’re not going to have a donkey come in here today!

What’s the deal with the donkey? Jesus rode into Jerusalem, down the Mount of Olives, and through the Eastern gate where the Messiah was to come. What’s the point? Well, it’s because the Scripture tells us – the Prophet tells us that the new kingdom is established when David returns. When King David returns to reestablish the great kingdom of Israel... here’s what Zechariah says... this is from Matthew, which is talking about the prophet Zechariah. “This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: ‘Say to Daughter Zion, See your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’” (Matthew 21:4-5, Zechariah 9:9).

I was looking at the piece you sang where it says he was on a white horse. That’s from Revelation 19 – a very different picture of King Jesus.

What we want to talk about is Jesus coming in on a donkey is to say Jesus is King, he's reestablishing the Kingdom of David. He's the one to ride through the doors – the eastern gate.

What's the deal with these palm branches? Why palm branches? Well, there was a period of time that ended in 63 BC when Pompey of Rome conquered Israel. A hundred years before that, Israel was an independent nation. It's only time since David that Israel was an independent nation. That was called the Hasmonaean dynasty of kings. Sometimes called the Maccabees. The palm branch was the symbol of the Hasmonaean kings. Can you imagine how King Herod would feel when those who came before him, the ones that Rome deposed on his behalf, were waving those palm branches? Wow – that's a threat. They didn't crucify Jesus because he taught Jesus to love each other. They crucified Jesus because he was a threat to the religious and political order of the day. This palm branch said, "This guy's the king! And any other kings better be careful!"

There are two different kinds of kings it seems to me. We in the United States don't think we need a king. We're ruled by a democracy. But somehow, despite that, we are obsessed with the Royals in the United Kingdom. It's like all the time. If you want to know how much time I've spent watching "The Crown" – we're in the sixth season of that program. How many hours have I spent watching it? And King Charles, he really doesn't have any power at all, if you think about it.

So, for every bill that Parliament passes, the sovereign of the United Kingdom has to sign. But he has no choice but to sign. It's like, "Okay, this is happening. I'm going to bless it." So that's one kind of king—someone who's fairly impotent. He stands for something but doesn't really have any power.

The other kind of king is King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, who is the King of Saudi Arabia. And he has a lot of power. In fact, he and his son, the crown prince, gathered about 500 of their extended family and best friends and put them in jail. If you call the Ritz Carlton a jail, they put all of them in the Ritz Carlton and wouldn't let them leave until they acknowledged that they had stolen money from the kingdom. And when the king says something, it happens. That's a very different kind of king.

So, let me ask you - what kind of a king is Jesus?

I've told you before that there are certain doctrines in theology that are known as dogmas. These are doctrines that every tradition would agree with, whether you're Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Methodist, Presbyterian, or Baptist. Everyone would agree with

those doctrines. One of those is the Sovereignty of God. To say that God is sovereign is to say that God is the king. King Charles is the sovereign of the United Kingdom. To say God is sovereign, every Christian, every denomination, would say that God is sovereign.

But beyond that, the question is – what does that mean to say that God is sovereign? There are many different understandings, and I want to kind of lift up two threads of that for us to wrestle with. On the one hand, you'll hear people say something like, when something bad happens, they'll say, "Do not worry; God's in control." Or "Do not worry, God's in charge, and we're going to trust God with this." Or sometimes someone will say, "It's part of God's plan." If it's part of God's plan and something really bad is happening, how do we understand that? How do we wrestle with it? This is called the problem of *theodicy*. That's if God is all good, and if God is all-powerful, why do evil things happen? If God is all good and all-powerful, why do evil things happen?

There are two sorts of streams of thought. One is that it really is part of God's plan that we don't understand what God is doing, that God is at work, and what God is doing, we may not understand it. It may look bad or seem bad, but it's part of a plan. And that plan will ultimately turn out to be good. I would suggest to you that many of you might have had that experience in your life. Where you go through a really difficult thing and look back on it and say, "Man, that really was a good thing." We see that stream that everything that happens is part of God's plan throughout Scripture.

For example, in the book of Genesis, Joseph – the one with a coat of many colors was thrown into a pit by his brothers. He is left there to die. We'd all agree that's a bad thing. Yet he's rescued from that pit and taken to Egypt. Once there, he becomes a powerful leader; he's very wise. He saves up all the grain in the good years so that when the famine hits Egypt has extra grain. His brothers, thinking he's dead, come from Israel, and he's able to help save them. Here's what the book of Genesis says: Joseph says, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." (Genesis 50:20). One commentator (S. Michael Houdmann) says it this way: "This landmark verse makes no excuse for human sin while emphasizing that events we cannot understand are still part of God's greater plan." So, that's one way that some people understand the sovereignty of God. That everything is part of the plan, God knows about it. It may seem bad and it's going to be used to get us to the right thing if we'll just trust.

The other stream that runs through Scripture, all the way through as well, is that the way we deal with this issue of theodicy is to recognize that there are other powers at work in the world besides God. We say that God has self-limited. That God, when he created human beings, said, "I'm going to give away some of my power to you. I've created you in my image, and I'm going to give you free will. I'm not going to control you. I'm not going to control everything you do. You have your own choice about what you're going to do. And so, I have self-limited my power and given that to you. And in fact, so that you will have an actual choice about whether to worship and follow me as I intended you to do, there's evil in the world, too. To choose to love me means you really have to have a choice. And love that is coerced is not really love. So, I want you to have some of your own power. And because of that, there's going to be evil in the world."

Listen to this from Ephesians 6: "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power; put on the whole armor of God, so you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil, for our struggle is not against blood and flesh but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness," (Ephesians 6:10-12). This is an idea that is recognized that there are powers that are not of God and so that God doesn't choose for them to do these evil things. They have their own power, and they do them. What God is in the business of doing is resisting that. Of seeking to overcome that. Seeking to overcome the darkness with light.

Kate Bowler is a professor of Christian History at Duke Divinity School and she's actually an expert on the Prosperity Gospel in America and how it's grown across America. When she was young, she was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer, and she had a small child. She said, "I believe God had a wonderful plan for my life. Certainly, this can't be part of the plan." She said that when she was still in the hospital, a neighbor came by and had a covered dish and was very well-meaning. He came by to say he was praying for them. Her husband answered the door, and somehow, in the midst of the conversation, the man said to her husband, "We just have to hold fast to the fact that everything happens for a reason." Her husband said, "Then I'd like to hear it. Tell me, why is my wife dying? Why is my child going to be motherless? Why don't you share that with me?" Then the visitor handed him the dish and said, "I'll be praying for you," and went on about their business.

Kate Bowler writes this: “Christians want me to reassure them that my cancer is all part of a plan. A few letters even suggested that God’s plan was that I get cancer so I could help by writing the New York Times article. (She wrote an article about her journey.) There is a circular logic to these attempts to explain the course of any life. If you inspire people while dying, the plan for your life is that you will become an example to others. If you don’t and you die kicking and screaming, the plan is that you discover some important divine lessons. Either way, learn to accept God’s plan.” (Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved*) So this view of a God who has self-limited recognizes there are other powers. So, does that mean that our God is like King Charles? Is our King a king like King Charles? That sort of says, “I’m just going to let everything happen.”

I think if you open the Gospels of Jesus Christ, you see that’s not the case at all. What you see is that there’s a new kingdom, and in that new kingdom, it’s different. People are healed. Did you see he healed people, cleansed lepers, cast out demons? Casting out demons attacking the evil around him. He reached out to the outcasts and brought them in. He shared and taught the good news of a God who loves you all the time, no matter what.

If we ask ourselves, what is Jesus king of when he’s riding in on a donkey? Is it the king of Israel who’s going to overthrow Rome? I don’t think so. No, Jesus is the king of the Kingdom of God. We begin Lent on Ash Wednesday, marking people with ashes, and we shared this passage in Mark 1. This is right after Jesus has been tempted by Satan in the wilderness, and he’s beginning his ministry. Here’s what he says, “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the good news.’” (Mark 1:14-15). There is a kingdom around us, and Jesus is the king of it. It operates by an entirely different set of rules and principles and Jesus explains it in his parables and in his teaching. It’s an altogether different kind of kingdom from the kingdom of the world. It’s a kingdom where the last are first, and the first are last. It’s a kingdom where we gain our life by giving it away. It’s a kingdom where when someone slaps us on one cheek, we turn the other cheek to them as well. It’s a kingdom where instead of an eye for an eye, we respond with, “How many times do you forgive your brother? Seven times seventy times.” It’s an altogether different way of living. And if we want Jesus to be king, we acknowledge ourselves as his subjects and choose to live by to repent and live by the good news of this kingdom of God. That’s what we hold fast to. To believe that God is at work in this

kingdom of light, overcoming the kingdom of darkness. And we are part of his subjects in that important work.

So, king of what? King of the Kingdom of God. And king, when? Well, that's an interesting question. Is the kingdom here now, or is the kingdom coming someday?

I always love it when you're reading Scripture, and it seems to say two different things, one right after the other. Here's what Jesus says in Luke 17: "Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, he answered them, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There! For behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.'" (Luke 17:20-21). It's right here among us. It's the way we live together. That's the kingdom of God. It's right here now.

Then, two chapters later, he says this in Luke 19: "As they heard these things, he proceeded to tell them a parable, because he was near to Jerusalem and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately. He said, therefore, 'A nobleman went to a far country to receive a kingdom and then return.'" (Luke 19:11-12). The kingdom is someday that when Jesus returns and maybe there's the white horse. When Jesus returns that kingdom will reach its completion, will reach its fulfillment.

That's the kingdom we long for, that we can live as part of now but we long for its fulfillment.

When I was talking to you about Kate Bowler, here's what she wrote: "I want a world where there is no need for pediatric oncology, UNICEF, military budgets, or suicide rails on the roofs of tall buildings. The world would drip with mercy. Thy kingdom come, I pray, and my heart aches. And my tongue trips over the rest. Thy will be done."

That donkey riding down the Mount of Olives is a foretaste of what's ahead. When in the words of Paul's letters to the Philippians: "Every knee will bend on earth, above the earth, and under the earth. And every tongue will confess Jesus is Lord." And in the words of Revelation, "He who sat upon the throne said, 'I will wipe away every tear from their eyes. And death will be no more, and mourning and crying and pain will be no more. For the former things have passed away.'"

Thy Kingdom come. They will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Let's pray together. *O Gracious God, we do acknowledge that you're sovereign. We're not sure exactly how all of it fits together we confess. And yet we do know that you are always good and that there is no evil or darkness in you. So, God, we want to be a part of your kingdom. We want to be your subjects. So, we repent and choose to live our lives by the principles and teachings of that kingdom. And we believe with all our hearts that one day thy kingdom will come in its fullness and that every knee will bow and that death and mourning and pain will be no more. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.*