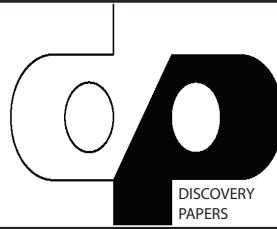


WHAT KIND OF KINGDOM?

PALM SUNDAY



Catalog No. 20160320
Mark 11:1-11
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March 30, 2016

Mark 11:1-11

Imagine you walked out of church today and saw a commotion at the church next door. As you looked, you saw a red convertible pull out of the driveway with the top down. The windshield was decorated with white shoe polish. Behind the car were strings tied with soda cans bouncing along the road. In the driver's seat was a man in a black tuxedo, smiling widely. In the passenger seat was a woman in a white dress, looking beautiful.

With just one glance you would know a lot about this scene. You would know that this couple had just gotten married. You would also have some idea that they probably dated as their relationship grew over the past year or more. You'd know that this man probably knelt down on one knee to propose sometime in the past months. And you'd know that this couple spent the last six months furiously planning the largest party they'd ever throw.

You'd also know something about this couple's future. You would know that they would probably be going away to a beach for the next week or so. You would know that they'd return to their lives after that and have to adjust to sharing a bathroom with someone of the opposite sex. You would guess that in a few years they might welcome a tiny, screaming person into the world. And that they would grow to learn the joys and heartaches of being called Mommy and Daddy.

In just one glance, you'd be able to have a pretty good guess about the past, the present, and the future. In a second, all of this would be clear to you.

If you lived in Israel during the first century, there is a good chance that around this time of year, you would have been traveling to Jerusalem to celebrate the biggest festival of the Jewish calendar. And if you arrived at the gates of Jerusalem and saw the scene that we heard read from Mark 11:1-11, then you would know exactly what was happening.

You'd probably remember the famous story that was told in 1 Kings 1 when David put his son Solomon on a donkey. One of David's other sons was claiming to be king. David's act made it clear that Solomon was his choice as the real king.

You might think about the current king during Mark 11:1-11, who called himself Caesar. You might think that this man on a donkey was making the bold and dangerous claim of being a new king. You would see the people yelling and know that these people wanted a regime change. They wanted things to be different. You would know that they thought this man could do that for them.

You would know a lot about what was going on, but there would be a question growing in your mind. As you got closer, the question would loom larger and larger. It would start to dominate your thoughts. Without knowing the answer to this question, you wouldn't know how to feel about these events that you were witnessing. You wouldn't know whether to be excited, pessimistic, hesitant, or terrified.

You would know that a proclamation was being made about a new kingdom. But the question that you'd need to figure out is a simple one: what kind of kingdom is this man offering?

We've spent the last seven months immersed in the story of David, the most celebrated king of ancient Israel. All throughout his story, we've been talking a lot about David as king. But there's something that we haven't thought much about: the fact that David ruled a kingdom. Kings aren't just there for themselves. They have kingdoms. They establish them. They rule over them. They serve them. And sometimes they fail them.

So this morning, as we begin the week that leads up to Easter, we're going to be thinking about kingdoms. The traditional Palm Sunday story from the gospel of Mark describes Jesus entering into Jerusalem. His version of the story has a unique phrase that the other gospels don't use. He describes the people proclaiming, "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" (Mark 11:10).

We might have had a few questions if we had seen this happen in the first century on our way into Jerusalem. Looking back at this scene from the twenty-first century, we have many questions. We'll be thinking about three this morning, asking them of the people in this story and then asking them of ourselves as well.

First, what kind of kingdom did these people live in during the first century? What characterized their life? What about us? What are the kingdoms that we live in? What kinds of forces set the tone for our lives?

Second, we can tell by their enthusiasm for Jesus that they weren't very happy with their current kingdom. Why not? What did they want to change about their world? What kind of kingdom did they want to be a part of?

What about us? It's not hard to look around and realize that people aren't happy with the kingdoms that we live in. The current election cycle seems to be about this unhappiness. But what kind of kingdom do we want to live in? What are we unhappy about? What would make things better?

Finally, we want to think about Jesus himself. He rode a donkey into the capital of God's kingdom on earth. He knew what he was doing. What was he thinking? What kind of kingdom was he proclaiming? This fateful week in Israel saw the establishment of a new kingdom that would change the world. But what kind of a kingdom was it?

These are our three questions this morning. What kind of a kingdom do we live in? What kind of a kingdom do we want to live in? And what kind of a kingdom is Jesus the king of?

What kind of kingdom do we live in?

It might help to think about what a kingdom is. Let's consider four things that are typically a part of a kingdom. Kingdoms have a leader who governs them. Kingdoms have territory that defines them. Kingdoms have citizens: the people who inhabit them. And kingdoms have a culture—the kind of life that is lived.

There are many other things that make up a kingdom, but keep these four in mind. A leader. A territory. A people. And a culture.

In the first century, Caesar was the Lord. But there were many other leaders who would have influenced your life. Herod Antipas was king in Galilee, where

much of Jesus' ministry took place. A little farther south, Jerusalem didn't have a king. It was managed by a governor named Pontius Pilate. Because Rome allowed great local autonomy, religious leaders had a lot of civic power. These were the Jewish scribes, the elders, and the High Priest.

The territory was the land of Israel, but it didn't feel like home because of the Roman soldiers everywhere.

The people were a mix from many places. They were half-Jews to Romans to Africans and more. You could hardly call the land of Israel a Jewish region anymore.

And life was hard. Most people were poor. You lived in a small village as a farmer or shepherd. Or you lived in a crowded city as a merchant or tradesperson. You knew a lot about "taxation without representation." You paid taxes to Rome, to Herod, to the temple, and probably to the local authorities. Most people had some group they identified with. You would be part of a religious faction or a political alliance or a trade guild or a tribe.

This is the world they lived in. It was a confusing mix of religious, political, and professional kingdoms. But there was one thing every faithful Jew agreed with: this wasn't the way it was supposed to be. This was supposed to be a Jewish nation, not a Roman province.

What about now? Two thousand years later. Have things changed all that much? Think about the different aspects of your life. What kind of kingdom do you live in?

It would be nice to say that we live in one kind of a kingdom. But the truth is that our lives are also a complicated mixture of allegiances, affiliations, memberships, and loyalties. Many of us here are American citizens. But some of you have other backgrounds: Asia, Africa, Europe, South America, and Australia (or even Texas!). You still consider yourself part of those kingdoms in some sense.

You work in a kind of professional kingdom. Your companies have leaders, territories, citizens, and a culture all its own. They are fighting to compete with other kingdoms, trying to take territories, grow their citizens, and earn glory for their leaders.

We're also part of local communities, apartment complexes, school districts, and neighborhoods. We live out our lives in a similar confusing mix of kingdoms. Political. Corporate. Social. Religious.

But here's the difference: most of us like our kingdoms. For the large part, we have chosen them. In fact, we are tempted to think that if we can manage to find ourselves in the right kingdoms, things will work out well for us.

The Bible speaks differently of the kingdoms in our world. When the apostle Paul writes to a young church in Colossae, he tells them this in **Colossians 1:13**:

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness.

Paul tried to help the Colossians understand that the kingdom of this world is a domain of darkness. It is oppressive and self-serving. It is ambitious and greedy. It is dangerous and cold-hearted.

One of the big challenges to faith in the Silicon Valley is that most of the kingdoms we live in are very nice. A lot of the kingdoms of our world don't seem like "domains of darkness." One of the hardest things about our area is that things often don't seem that dark.

Our problem is not that we're dissatisfied with the kingdoms of this world. It's just that we think we've chosen poorly. Or we didn't get the right opportunity to choose a different company, a different neighborhood, a better school, a stronger church. One of the greatest problems in our area, and we are not at all exempt from it, is that we have too much faith in the kingdoms of this world.

About a year ago, the demographic firm Barna released a report about the most unchurched areas of the country. It should come as no surprise that the San Francisco metropolitan area topped the list. According to Barna, 61% of people in this area haven't attended a church service in the past six months.¹

We also won the top spot for the highest concentration of "dechurched" population. That refers to people who used to go to church, but don't anymore. Forty-eight percent of people in this area fall into that category.²

Pat Gelsinger, the CEO of VMWare and the founder of Transforming the Bay with Christ, likes to describe the Silicon Valley in this way:

*We are the richest. We are the most influential. We have the lowest rate of church attendance. We also have the lowest rate of philanthropic giving. The bay area is full of rich, influential, miserly pagans.*³

It seems to be working out very well for a many people. Except, we still aren't happy. The people around us still aren't happy. We complain a lot. We want and we crave and we lust and we demand. Maybe the kingdoms around us aren't all that we think they are.

What kind of kingdom do we live in? It's a pretty kingdom. It's a powerful kingdom. It's a successful kingdom. But maybe it really is a domain of darkness. Maybe that's why we want something more.

What kind of kingdom do we want?

That crowd in the first century knew that they wanted something else. They knew they weren't happy. As Jesus walked into the city, they proclaimed "Hosanna in the highest" (Mark 11:10b). Hosanna means "save now." These people wanted salvation.

The longing for a different kind of kingdom often takes the form of wishing things were the way they had been in the past. You see it in presidential slogans like "Make America Great Again." You see it when people talk about how things were "back when I was a kid." You hear it around here (PBC) sometimes when people refer to the good old days of Ray Stedman.

That's what these people in the first century were doing. They wanted the glory days of David to return. They had good reason to want this because for hundreds of years the prophets had said this would happen. Their lives were saturated with promises of a Messiah like this.

Isaiah 9:7:

Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on 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 forevermore.

It had been a thousand years since David was king. What was it that they remembered? What kind of kingdom did they want?

For starters, David was a fabulously successful military leader. We don't have a record of him losing a single battle. Stop and think about that for a moment. Here's an ancient near-Eastern king who would go into battle with his people (most of the time) and he never lost. That's unbelievable.

David was also incredibly wealthy. Most of the wealth that his son Solomon was known for was actually amassed by David. Solomon was an ancient trust fund baby.

David made Israel a world power. People feared and admired the nation of Israel.

The kingdom of David was characterized by peace, prosperity, and prestige. They defeated their enemies. They lived lives of abundance. They were known and respected throughout the world.

None of these things were true in the first century. They didn't know peace. Armed soldiers occupied their land. They didn't enjoy prosperity. Making enough to live on was hard enough before Rome pillaged their earnings. And they definitely didn't have prestige. Israel was a laughingstock. Her god was old-fashioned and impotent.

But in the Scriptures, faith is always propelled forward by hope. Never by nostalgia and certainly not by fear. When the Scriptures speak of the throne of David, they speak of a new king that would redeem his throne, not simply return to the past. They wanted what they remembered of David's kingdom: peace, prosperity, and prestige. In a word, they wanted to live in a kingdom of success.

Are we that different? Isn't that basically what we want? What about you? What kind of kingdom do you want?

There's a country song that my wife enjoys. And even though I claim not to like country music, I sometimes enjoy it too.

*"I know everybody says
Money can't buy happiness
But it can buy me a boat
And it can buy me a truck to pull it"⁴*

One of the other verses reads:

*"I keep hearing that money is the root of all evil
And you can't fit a camel through the eye of a needle
I'm sure that's probably true
But it still sounds pretty cool"⁵*

I think we want the same things they wanted in the first century: peace, prosperity, prestige.

The odd thing is that we have more of those things than anyone in any culture in any period of history has ever known.

Most of don't know what it's like to worry that our lives will be destroyed by war. We don't go to bed wondering whether our land will be overtaken. Few cultures in history have the kind of peace that the U.S. has known.

Many of us don't feel very prosperous because the area that we live in has such an incredibly high cost of living. But we are among the top 1% of the richest people in the world today and certainly throughout history. How many people could not think twice about spending \$5 on a cup of coffee?

And what about prestige? Stanford. Facebook. Google. Apple. The heart of start-ups. We are the center of the technological world. Everybody knows about us. What happens in Silicon Valley does not stay in Silicon Valley.

So what do we really want? We have peace and prosperity and prestige. What more do we want? It's a surprisingly difficult question to answer. What is it that you really want? Many of us just don't know.

The problem is that if you don't know what you want, there are plenty of forces in our culture that will tell you what you want. If you don't know what you want, you are far more susceptible to all these messages that bombard us in our culture. The kingdoms around us tell us that we want is what they are selling.

And around Silicon Valley, in a place of incredible peace, prosperity and prestige, all of it boils down to one word: more.

We think we want more money. We think we want more position. We want to be more attractive or more fit or better thought of or have more free time or be more influential. We already live in a kingdom of success. We have a lot. But we want more.

In the first century, you could say people lived in a failed kingdom. They wanted success. Today, we live in a successful kingdom. But we still want a different kind of kingdom. We want more.

What kind of a kingdom does Jesus bring?

This brings us to our last question. We have a better idea of the kind of kingdom that these people were hoping for as they welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem. But were they hoping for the same kind of a kingdom that he was offering? What kind of a kingdom was Jesus actually announcing?

Spoiler alert: it's not what they expected. It's not what anyone expected. Jesus fulfilled over 300 prophesies concerning his birth and ministry. Even so, the kind of kingdom that he was offering took everyone by surprise.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus began his ministry by talking about the kingdom of God. In fact, the first words he spoke in the Gospel had to do with the kingdom.

Mark 1:15:

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.

What is this kingdom of God? You can say that the leader is Jesus. The territory is the whole earth. The citizens are from all tribes and nations. The culture is overflowing, abundant, eternal life.

But there's more than that. Those are the specifications. But what is it really like? You can tell me about the engine and the tires and the upholstery of a car. But what I want to know is how it feels to drive it. That's why Jesus told stories. Seventeen times in this Gospel, Jesus uses analogies and images to describe this kingdom.

This kingdom must be united or it cannot stand (Mark 3:24). The secrets of this kingdom are given to those of faith (Mark 4:11). The kingdom is like a man scattering seed on different kinds of ground (Mark 4:26). It's like a mustard seed which starts off tiny but becomes massive (Mark 4:30-31). He says that it comes with power (Mark 9:1). He says it's better to enter the kingdom with one eye than to fall to temptation (Mark 9:47). He says the kingdom belongs to children (Mark 10:14).

He says that it's difficult for the wealthy to enter this kingdom (Mark 10:23). He tells the scribe who just wants to love God and love his neighbor that he is not far from this kingdom (Mark 12:34). He tells his disciples that he's looking forward to drinking wine with them again when he returns in this kingdom (Mark 14:25). And after he has died with the label of "King" above his head, his body is removed by a Jew "who himself was looking for the kingdom of God" (Mark 15:43).

Do you get a flavor for this kingdom? Can you get a sense of what it's like? We can't always understand it or describe it. But we're drawn to it. There is something compelling about it.

Donald Kraybill wrote a book almost forty years ago called *The Upside-Down Kingdom*. He says the following,

*"Underlying all Jesus' teaching about the kingdom is a call to respond. He invites us not to study but to join; not to dissect but to enter. What will we do with it? How will we respond?"*⁶

What kingdoms do you live in? What kingdom do you want to live in? Are you willing to take a step and live in the kingdom that Jesus is establishing? Not to study, but to join. Are you willing to enter? Will you join the kingdom of Jesus?

One of the essential aspects of any kingdom is that it wants to grow. Kingdoms want to expand, to encompass more territory and to count more citizens. The word we usually use to describe this is "conquer". Kingdoms want to conquer other kingdoms.

The kingdom that Jesus brings is no different in that regard. This kingdom will grow. In fact, the Bible declares that the kingdom of God will eventually be the last one standing. Revelation 11:15 records an angel blowing a trumpet in the last days and loud voices from heaven proclaiming this,

The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.

But there is something that makes the kingdom of God different from any other kingdom of the world. The kingdoms of the world conquer through violence, competition, destruction, and fear. They seek their own glory. They trample any in their way.

Not the kingdom of Jesus. Instead of peace, Jesus suffers violence. Instead of prosperity, Jesus is poor. Instead of prestige, Jesus is humiliated and publicly scorned. This is the kind of leader that will rule this new kingdom. This is the culture of its citizens. Will you join this kingdom?

Think again about the people that we live among. Think again about the citizens of the kingdoms of this world. Those who live in the domain of darkness.

What do they want? They think they want more. They think that these kingdoms will offer what they want. But maybe it's the kingdom of God, the kingdom that Jesus is bringing in that will meet their deepest need.

We do not just join the kingdom of God. We are agents of this kingdom. We are participants in the love and sacrifice and humility that characterize and expand this kingdom. Jesus doesn't conquer. Neither do we.

We don't win arguments and dominate the political scene and protect the power of the church. We sacrifice ourselves for the vulnerable. We lay down our lives. We humble ourselves. This is what it means to love the world. This is what it means to participate in the kingdom of God. This is why we participate in Beautiful Day, where we take a week to worship not in our building, but out in the world through service. This is why I'm excited for a new effort in the Bay Area called Foster the Bay, which is trying to recruit foster families from churches. You'll be hearing more about Foster the Bay in the future.

This is why next Sunday is a great time to invite people who don't know what they want to come and hear the Christian story. The resurrection of Jesus is the heart of our faith. Do you know someone whom you could invite? On Easter, like no other Sunday, you get a powerful taste of the person of Christ.

Don't just study this kingdom of God. Join it. But don't just join it, participate in it. Play your part as an agent of the loving community of healing and hope being established by God through Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Think again about this story that we commemorate today. A man on a donkey riding through city gates while the crowds around him cheered and lay down their cloaks.

At first glance, you and I might not know what is going on. It seems foreign to us. But after reflecting on it, we have come to realize just how significant this action was. This was the proclamation of a new kingdom.

What kind of a kingdom do we live in? It's a kingdom of darkness. Churches are being torn down for apartment buildings. The chapels in our airports are being replaced by yoga studios. People are moving farther and farther away from God. The one who creates us and redeems us and gives us life has been forgotten.

People want a new kingdom. They know they aren't happy. But the only answer that makes sense is more. We have so much. We think all we need is more. We can't see that it's just an endless trap.

It's this new kind of a kingdom that Jesus is bringing that is really what we want. It's hard to describe. It doesn't make sense to everyone. But once you've tasted it, you understand. A leader that lays down his life for you. A community who embraces you, includes you, and sacrifices for you. A life of freedom and meaning and love.

This is the kingdom of God. It's the kingdom Jesus is announcing. It's the kingdom that we can join. It's the kingdom that we can invite others into. Join Jesus in his kingdom. Join him as he proclaims it to the world.

Endnotes

³ "What Are the Least Churched Cities in the U.S.?" Barna:Cities. Web. 24 April 2015. <<http://cities.barna.org/barna-cities-the-top-churchless-metro-areas/>>

² Ibid.

³ Gelsinger, Pat. Transforming the Bay with Christ Keynote Address. Mountain View, CA. 10 January 2015.

⁴ Janson, Chris. "Buy Me A Boat." 2015. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQPjKSVe1tQ>>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kraybill, Donald. *The Upside-Down Kingdom*. Herald Press; 5th Updated edition (August 1, 2011)