



Sermon for the Sunday Next before Advent

Jeremiah 23:5-8 & St. John 6:5-14

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One of the themes that the New Testament stresses over and over is the idea that the kingdom of God is—at least for now—otherworldly. Jesus stresses this especially throughout St. John’s gospel: “My kingdom is not of this world.” And every time Jesus made this point he confused the Jews—even his disciples. They were living as a beaten down and subjugated people. For most of the previous seven hundred years, the Jews had lived under the boot of the world’s great empires: the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greek, and the Romans. They were expecting a Messiah who would lead a victorious army against the Romans, throw them out, and usher in a rebirth of the kingdom of David and Solomon. They didn’t understand all these statements that Jesus made about a spiritual kingdom.

Brothers and sisters, as Christians we *do* understand that Jesus’ kingdom is not of this world, but we still have a similar problem to that of the Jews. We understand that as God’s people we continue to live in this world. And we also understand that while we may live *here*, our real citizenship is *heavenly*—that we’re living with one foot in each kingdom. Our problem, though, is that we too often *forget* about the reality of God’s kingdom. The Jews were obsessed with the world, because the only understanding they had of the kingdom of God was Israel. For them, their nation *was* God’s kingdom and so they were stuck living their lives in this world. But in practical terms, we have the same problem. We know in our heads that we belong to a spiritual kingdom and that our citizenship is in heaven, but somehow we don’t know it in our hearts. We get caught up in the things and the cares and the worries of this world so much that we hardly give a thought to heaven. The book of Revelation gives us a vivid picture of our future life in Christ, living before the throne and in the midst of the Lamb, but

when we close the book, that vision quickly fades and all our time, not to mention our physical and spiritual resources are spent the things of this world. The kingdom of heaven, in practical terms, is too often just pie in the sky. We lose our eternal perspective and we start living as if there’s nothing more to life than the world here and now.

The Church’s calendar is meant to give us weekly kick to remind us that God’s kingdom may be spiritual, but that it truly is a reality for us here and now, and that that reality should make a difference in how we live our lives. Today may be November 21st, but as we walk through the doors of the church, we’re reminded that, more importantly, today is the Sunday Next Before Advent. And tomorrow morning when I get out of bed, it may be November 22nd, but as I kneel for prayer and open my Prayer Book, I’m reminded again—as I will be each day of this coming week—that it’s also the Monday, the Tuesday, the Wednesday after the Sunday Next Before Advent. The calendar becomes a tangible reminder in our daily lives that, yes, we are *in* the world, but we are not *of* the world and that we should be living as citizens of God’s kingdom.

But more specifically, as we move into Advent and as we begin a new year in the next week—we enter a season of the year that is wholly designed to point us to the reality that we are God’s people and citizens of his kingdom. This last Sunday of the old year is an important one as it bridges the two years. The lessons of Trinitytide teach us about the reality of the Christian life and how to live as heavenly citizens. We’ve seen that these past six months as we’ve studied the 119th Psalm. And as we move into Advent the lessons are going to be reminding us that God has no intention of leaving us as aliens in a strange land forever. He has called us out of the world in our baptism and he’s using our time here as a training ground for eternity, but eternity *will* come. His kingdom isn’t pie-in-the-sky. Jesus will come back and when he does, this time, we’ll be with him forever—again, pointing us to that wonderful scene of the saints, rescued from this present tribulation, to live for eternity before his throne. Today’s lessons turn us from life here and point us toward eternity: Jeremiah points us to the First Advent and St. John’s telling of the feeding of the five thousand shows Jesus at work and calls us

to be prepared ourselves as it points to his Second Advent.

Look with me at Jeremiah 23:5-8. This is one of those few Sundays where we have an Old Testament lesson in place of one from the New Testament epistles, but there’s a reason. The lesson goes back to the prophets so that we can be pointed to the first coming of Jesus. When Jeremiah wrote these words, the world was a complete disaster for God’s people. For centuries they had, over and over, rejected him as their God. They would pay him lip service, going through the motions of religion, but in reality living as if he didn’t exist. The prophets repeatedly called them back to God, but they trusted instead in horses and chariots. Worse, more often than not, they spent those years worshipping the false gods of their pagan neighbours, even setting up altars to them alongside God’s altar in the temple.

God kept calling the people back to himself, but other than a small remnant of the faithful, the nation continually refused. And so God tried to get their attention by allowing all sorts of awful things to happen to them. Already, about 130 years before, the ten northern tribes of Israel had been wiped out and exiled by the Assyrians. Their punishment would eventually culminate in the conquest of Judah by the Babylonians, the total destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and the Jews themselves being carried away into exile in Babylon. At the point Jeremiah wrote these words, the Babylonians were already in control of Judah. Jehoiachin, a king who did nothing but evil, handed Jerusalem over to Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian emperor who exiled him along with anyone of any importance, looted the king’s treasury, and stripped the temple bare. He took everything and everyone important back to Babylon and set up a puppet king in Jerusalem named Zedekiah. The nation was decimated, the people were desperately poor, and they lived under the boot of the Babylonians. Jeremiah’s often called the “weeping prophet” because he lived through all of that death and destruction and wrote about the conquest and destruction of Judah. And yet in the middle of what looked totally hopeless, he writes a message of hope:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall

execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

In a day when the rightful heir to David’s throne was a prisoner in a foreign land, when the temple of God was stripped bare and the worship of God had ceased, and when God’s people were scattered, Jeremiah prophesied that God would not leave his people desolate forever. A day was coming in which a true heir of David would again rule over God’s people—he would reign not as a puppet of some foreign emperor, but as the rightful king, and in his wise reign he would bring justice and righteousness to the kingdom. Imagine the hope that would inspire in these people who heard Jeremiah. They had no hope. The kingdom of God’s people was controlled by foreign pagans. There was no justice and there was no righteousness. And there certainly wasn’t any wisdom. In contrast, God says through Jeremiah, in the day of the coming king, his people will be saved and dwell in security. In fact, Jeremiah even puts it in terms of the scattered people being brought back together in one place: “Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell in security.”

And then to draw a complete contrast with the present state of the kingdom, he says that this coming righteous Branch will be called “The LORD is our righteousness.” The significance of that doesn’t show itself to us immediately because we don’t speak Hebrew. Remember that the corrupt puppet king who was on the throne at this time was Zedekiah. The name “Zedekiah” means “The LORD is our righteousness”. And yet Zedekiah made a mockery of that name. Scripture tells us that he did nothing but evil in the sight of the Lord, just as the kings before him. But Zedekiah made an excellent representative of the people for spiritual purposes. They had all rejected God and compromised with the world. Their destruction by the Babylonians was God’s wake-up call to them. There was no righteousness left in the land. But, says, Jeremiah, that’s going to change one day. The people had no righteousness of their own, they stood under the just condemnation and punishment of the Lord, but the Lord was going to send a king who would be and

who would provide the righteousness the people didn’t have on their own.

In fact, Zechariah writes about this “Branch” and says, “Behold, the man whose name is the Branch: for he shall branch out from his place, and he shall build the temple of the LORD” (Zechariah 6:12). Zechariah lived during the time after the temple was not only stripped bare as it was in Jeremiah’s time, but after Zedekiah had stupidly tried to revolt, and the Babylonians had swept down on Jerusalem and utterly destroyed both the city and the temple. But at a future time this Branch—this king in the line of David—would come to be the righteousness the people did not have. He would save them. And in a time when, because of their sins God had removed not only his presence, but even the temple—the external emblem of his presence—this righteous king would restore the presence of God to his people.

And Jeremiah says that this King’s reign would be so great that it would completely change the identity of the people. Look at verses 7 and 8:

Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when they shall no longer say, “As the LORD lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,” but “As the LORD lives who brought up and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them.” Then they shall dwell in their own land.

The national identity of the Jews was tied to the Exodus—the time 900 years before when God had rescued the people from slavery in Egypt and led them into the Promised Land. Their national baptism had been in the Red Sea during that rescue and that’s what they looked back to when they thought of themselves as God’s people. And yet Jeremiah says that a day is coming when what this future righteous King will do is going to completely change that perspective. His subjects won’t be talking about when the Lord brought them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and into the Promised Land, but that they’re going to talk about how they were brought into this new King’s righteous kingdom from all the nations.

Brothers and sisters, Israel, in that time of desperation, is a type of each of us as we were before Jesus saved us. We were lost in our sins, living as God’s enemies, deserving nothing but death and destructions. We had absolutely nothing to bring to God that was deserving of his love. And yet he sent his own Son to be born of the line of David and to become one of us; to live a life of perfect obedience to the law; and then to die the death that each of us deserves that, as we put our faith in his sacrifice for us and submit to his kingship, he will be our righteousness—he will offer us what we can never have on our own, and because of that, he will give us what we need to enter the presence of God. In fact, not just enter the presence of God as the Jews would go to his temple, but he has established *us* as his temple—he has given the gift of the Holy Spirit to each and every believer and through that he makes us his temple. No longer do God’s people look back to a physical rescue in the Passover or through the waters of the Red Sea, but we look to our baptism in which we have been washed clean of our sins by water and given new life in his Spirit and we look to the Table as he offers here his body and blood as signs and seals of his covenant of redemption with us.

While our Epistle point us to the First Advent—to the coming of the righteous Branch—the Gospel shows us that the Branch did in fact come in the person of Jesus. The story is the feeding of the five thousand from St. John’s gospel. Thousands of people had followed Jesus out into the wilderness to see him heal the sick and to hear him teach and now they’re all hungry. It’s too far to go to town to buy food, besides no one had the money to buy food for all those thousands of people. So Jesus took five loaves of bread and two fish, donated by a young boy who was there, he blessed them, and then started distributing them to the people and was miraculously able to feed everyone there. And, in fact, not just feed them with enough to stave off hunger, but to let everyone have their fill. We know this because when everyone was done eating, John tells us that the disciples gathered up twelve baskets full of leftovers. The focus of the lesson today is in verse 14:

When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!”

If we put this story in context, we learn from St. Luke’s gospel that Jesus had just been preaching about the kingdom of God and from St. Matthew that John the Baptist had just been beheaded before this. The people loved John. And remember John’s message: “The kingdom of God is at hand!” No doubt a lot of people had hoped that John was the one to usher in that kingdom. Jesus was doing some great things, but as far as the people could tell, he wasn’t doing anything that made it look like he was going to start a revolt to throw out the Romans. John the Baptist, on the other hand, was just the sort of wild firebrand that might lead that kind of revolt. Now John was dead. If the people hoped for their Messiah, it was now Jesus or nothing. And so they followed him into the wilderness. They saw him healing the sick and heard him preaching about the kingdom of God. How anymore appropriate could the miracle be? Moses had led God’s people into a new kingdom and miraculously fed them in the wilderness and now Jesus was preaching about the kingdom and feeding them miraculously in the wilderness. He was like a new Moses, and so the people who saw this declared: “Surely he’s the Prophet who was foretold!”

Surely he was the King. His miracle here demonstrated the blessings of his reign. He had preached those familiar words, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33). He promised that if anyone would seek first after God, that God would provide for all his physical needs. And so these people had trusted his message. They followed him into the wilderness and he had provided for them miraculously. They had taken him at his word and he made good on his promise.

And he didn’t just barely meet their needs. He had met their needs lavishly. He took five loaves of bread and two fish, multiplied them, and fed five thousand men—that’s just the men, not counting the women and children—and when he was done, there were *twelve* baskets left over. Even after feeding thousands, there was more left over than there was to start with! And this teaches us something about the

lavishness of Christ’s spiritual provision for his people—for his Church. Jeremiah prophesied a kingdom in which God would care for his people and give them security. And that’s just what Jesus demonstrates. We can always trust he will meet our needs. But more importantly, as we seek first his kingdom, he’s going to equip us lavishly for our mission. St. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians: “God is able to make all grace *abound* to you, so that having *all sufficiency* in all things at all times, you may *abound* in every good work” (2 Corinthians 9:8). We have no lack of grace, no lack of mercy, no lack of love, and through his indwelling Holy Spirit none of us has any lack of power or gifting for the work he has called us to do. The Righteous Branch has come into the World. He has become our righteousness—the righteousness we can never have of ourselves. And he has offered himself as the Bread of Heaven, giving us new spiritual life and gifting us for ministry as we seek first his kingdom.

But, brothers and sisters, the First Advent always points us to the Second Advent. Jeremiah and the Old Testament prophets prophesied the first coming of the King to establish his kingdom—bringing righteousness, gathering his elect from the nations, and bringing them together as his Church—his true Israel—as he makes them a temple for himself. But the King himself prophesied that he would come back. The kingdom life we have now is only the down payment of the life we will have with him when his kingdom is fully consummated at his return—when his spiritual kingdom will become a physical reality. In the meantime we have work to do. As we come to the end of another year, consider the blessings he has poured out on you and consider the gifting for ministry that he’s given. Some we’ve used and some we’ve squandered. As the disciples did with the left over bread, gather up the fragments and consider again the call to ministry and service that he continues to give us as we move into the new year and come another step closer to his Second Advent. We all have one foot in this world, but don’t forget that Christ has planted your other foot planted firmly in God’s kingdom! Live *fully* in the grace he has given; use the gifts he has given you to advance his kingdom—don’t leave let them become leftovers; and take advantage of every opportunity he gives you to serve his kingdom.

Our collect today reminds us of two things: In coming to establish his kingdom the King calls us to “produce abundantly the fruit of good works” and that those who seek first the King and his kingdom, living in his righteousness, and abounding in the good works his gifts make possible, to them he will give abundant rewards. And yet if we don’t get busy about the work of the kingdom, we will miss out on both the call of duty and the reward at the end of the day. Because of our sinful natures, we’re always prone to ignoring our call. We have a natural inertia that drives us in the wrong direction. We need God to graciously change the desires of our hearts—to bring them into line with his righteous ways—and we need the power of his Spirit to get us moving in the right direction. And so we pray: *Stir up the wills of your faithful people*, Lord, so that we may produce abundantly the fruit of good works and receive your abundant reward, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.