

Ushering in the Kin-dom
John 18:33-37
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
November 25, 2018
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

In a typical year, when Thanksgiving falls later in the month of November, the Sunday right after Thanksgiving is also the first Sunday of Advent. So, we move quickly from gratitude into preparation.

And, for many of us that isn't only true in our rhythm of worship. For many the pressure to prepare for Christmas in our homes, in our gift giving habits, in our party planning, is so great that we barely recover from the Thanksgiving meal before we dive right in. In fact, our Black Friday sales invite us to start shopping before our dinner is even digested.

But, occasionally, we get this extra time. This year a whole extra week on the calendar before December becomes a reality. And in the rhythm of our worship, an extra Sunday before Advent is upon us.

So, here at First Christian, we are using this Sunday as an opportunity, you might say, to "prepare to prepare." While Advent is a season of preparing, today is a day to get ready to enter that season. It is the "Advent of Advent" if you will.

This gives us the opportunity to first ask ourselves what is it that Advent invites us to prepare for. After all, many of us get so consumed with preparing for our Christmas celebrations and in worship we often get consumed with preparing to hear the story of Jesus' birth again. But, Advent is about so much more.

It is not only about remembering the story of Jesus being born once in a time and place far away. But it is about anticipating the ways Jesus comes again and again AND even more

importantly, it is about choosing to be a part of that...choosing to work alongside Jesus to create the world God intended.

And there is one other thing worth noting. In addition to this being an extra Sunday before Advent begins, the liturgical calendar also names the Sunday before Advent Christ the King Sunday. And that is not inconsequential. Again, if we understand Advent to be a time of preparing for the fullness of God's presence here on earth, for the world to be shaped to truly reflect God's intention, *and* if we understand Jesus to be the one we follow on that journey, then the leadership of Jesus is to be celebrated. And we can hear that connection in today's text where Pilate is inquiring about Jesus' kingship.

This text, which we might more usually expect to hear during Holy Week in our worship services leading up to Easter, tells a story that takes place in the last days of Jesus' life. After sharing in public ministry for what we have come to assume was about three years, after reaching across boundaries, after critiquing the leaders of his day, after pointing people again and again toward God's ways even when those were very different than the ways of the Roman empire and the religious leaders...after all this, Jesus finds himself arrested, put on trial and eventually killed.

The conversation we heard today is one that takes place in this process, one where Pilate asks, "Are you the King of the Jews?" and Jesus doesn't answer directly but does make some declarations about what his kingdom, what a world under his leadership, might look like. And we are reminded again in his dying – just in case we missed it in his living – that the kingdom of God which Jesus came to usher into fuller existence is not like the kingdoms of this world.

The reality is that there is a stark difference that exists between what worldly kingdoms look like and what the world of God's intention is like. We see it in the life and teachings of

Jesus. We see it in this very text when Jesus answers, “My kingdom is not from this world...” We see it in the way he dies, not raising a hand against his enemies but offering love and forgiveness through it all.

Between that and the fact that the term “kingdom” hardly makes sense to those of us who have grown up in a democracy. The idea of leaders about whom we have no choice doesn’t make sense even when on multiple occasions over the last two decades leaders have been elected by a small margin or by the electoral rather than popular vote. But even with those experiences, still we understand leadership and systems to be things we can influence, things about which we have some choice.

And so, the term “kingdom of God” may have little draw for us. It may, in fact, be something we more often read past with the assumption that we know what is intended rather than truly consider the meaning of.

So, today I ask us to think this through and also, understanding that the term “kingdom of God” was a metaphor for something Jesus was pointing people toward, I invite us to entertain the notion of a new metaphor as we prepare for Advent...as we prepare to prepare to meet again Jesus who leads us in the ways of God.

A week ago this past Wednesday when the Bible study group looked at this text I asked them to make two lists. The first was qualities of kingdoms of this world. They named things like: wealth, greed, armies, power, strong principles, lots of rules, part of peoples’ identity, hierarchical, leaders with unearned respect, finite, driven by fear, on a trajectory toward injustice. They talked about that kingdoms of this world come in many forms and with many types of governmental organization, but that they refer to any system of power that shapes how a people or nation function.

The second list I asked them to make was a list of what the kingdom of God looks like, what its qualities are. And they named the following, many of which we hear directly from the teachings of Jesus: the poor are raised above the rich, there is power but it's a different type, justice is a priority, there is an understood responsibility toward other human beings and all of creation, love is central, expectations are turned on their head, peace is a priority, faith replaces fear.

If we are paying attention, this Jesus who we claim to follow, shows us in interaction after interaction, this second type of community. And if we are listening, Jesus asks us to live in the same ways and to create that community again and again, day after day.

And so, while we are used to the language of “kingdom of God” I have come to appreciate the work of those who challenge that language and metaphor as not only outdated but also inaccurate. Not only does kingdom language assume a gendered hierarchy, but it also lets us off the hook from challenging the ways God asks us to be different than what our earthly systems and leaders ask.

So, what language can act as a replacement? What new metaphor can we embrace?

In the 1970's Georgette Wilson, a Franciscan nun, coined the term “kin-dom” to replace “kingdom.” And thanks largely to the work of Hispanic theologian and professor of ethics and theology at Drew University, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, this term has gained some attention. Hear that word again – just a slight shift from kingdom to kin-dom, but the meaning is light years away.

So, what if we began to understand our role as followers of Jesus to be those who usher in the kin-dom of God? What if we began to understand the structure under which God invites us to live and love together to be one not of hierarchical, top down power where people live and

obey out of fear, but instead to understand that God invites us to live and love together in an equitable structure which takes seriously the value of all people and all of creation, where the weak are strong and the poor are rich, where love drives our activity and faith replaces fear?

This is what kin-dom is all about.

Over the coming weeks, as we prepare not just for Christmas celebrations, not just to hear the stories of Jesus' birth again, but as we prepare to open our hearts and our lives again to the presence of Jesus, to commit ourselves again to be not only his followers but co-workers alongside him who are bringing about the intentions of God...as we do all of this we are going to explore together what it might mean for us to live with a kin-dom understanding. What might it mean for us to shift our understanding from kingdom to kin-dom? What might it mean for us to shift our gaze from something that God will do somewhere out there to something God is doing with us here and now, today? What might it mean for us to work alongside Jesus in such ways that we usher in the kin-dom of God?

While the scriptures appear to have used the familiar term "kingdom of God" it seems it is time for us to look at the essence of what Jesus was calling us to. It seems it is time for us to change our language and our image to match not the language of this world, but to match the intention of Jesus.

So, together we will look at how God's kin-dom is about the connectedness of all humanity – how it is about our being in relationship with each other and living together as those created in the same womb. Together we will look at how God's kin-dom is about equality and peace, about the playing field being leveled. And together we will look at how God's kin-dom is not shaped as kingdoms of this world, but is an amazing upside-down world in which all expectations are turned on their heads.

Together we are invited to embrace what Jesus said in today's passage – “My kingdom is not from this world...” No, indeed, it is not a kingdom at all, but a kin-dom where all are valued and where peace reigns. It is a reality which we are not only invited to experience but to commit our lives that we may help usher it in.

May it be so.