



SUNDAY SERMON

How to Read the Bible: Sermon Series (3 of 3)

Good morning Friends. Today is the final sermon of my series on “How to Read the Bible.” In the first week, I made the case that the Big Story the Bible is trying to tell is about oppression and liberation: how the values of this world keep God’s people in bondage, and how God intends to liberate us from this oppression and set us free to build the Kingdom of God.

And we’ve considered two different texts so far that illuminate this Big Story in different ways: in week 1, we looked at the primal story of the people of Israel, told in the book of Exodus: how God rescued them from slavery in Egypt and brought them into their own land.

At first, God’s people were able to build a remarkably egalitarian society in this new country. But, as time went on they began to conform more and more to the ways of the world around them — first empowering a king to rule over them, and then using God and the Temple to legitimate the king’s rule. This is what happens when we start to make God in our image, rather than the other way around. We think God’s justice is like our justice; we pretend that God holds the same prejudices that we hold. And “God” becomes a shorthand that those in power use to justify and excuse the oppressive status quo that keeps them in power.

This is where Paul came in, last week: Paul wants to liberate us from a God that merely confirms human prejudices. Paul uses the good news about Jesus to reinterpret the meaning of the covenant. You see, by the time of the New Testament, the law God had revealed to Moses had evolved into a set of rules to be followed and sacrifices to be made.

But Jesus’ life changed this equation — and this is the revelation Paul has at his conversion. Jesus shows us that it isn’t our righteousness that matters: rather, it is the righteousness of God, God’s faith in us, that restores our relationship with God. If we are good, if we are righteous, if we are faithful, it is only because God is all of those things first, and we have allowed God’s love to live inside us.

This week, we turn to Jesus, and consider his head-on confrontation with the power of Rome. If this story sounds familiar, it’s because it’s nearly a direct parallel to Moses’ confrontation with Egypt. Different era, different empire, but both Egypt and Rome shared the same basic characteristics, which Marcus Borg describes as a “domination system,” the most common way of organizing human society from ancient times until the late middle ages.

continued

DATE

Epiphany 7
Sunday, Feb. 24, 2019

PREACHER

The Rev. Jason Cox

St. Columba's
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A domination system was marked by three characteristics: economic exploitation, political oppression, and religious legitimation. Let me take those one by one. First, religious legitimation: this means that the religion of the elites affirmed that the structures of society were ordained by God. Things are the way they are because God wants it that way.

Second, political oppression: meaning ordinary people had no voice and no vote in the structuring of society. And finally, economic exploitation: although only about ten percent of the people might have been considered elite, this small group controlled at least two-thirds of the annual production of wealth. The wealth was mostly from agriculture, and thus produced by the ninety percent who were peasants. "The consequences for peasant existence were dire: unremitting labor, borderline nourishment, high infant mortality rates, and radically lower life expectancies."

This is the class that Jesus was born into, and this is the world into which he brings his most urgent message, that we heard today in words from the Gospel of Mark: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

The Kingdom of God has come near: The Kingdom of God is Jesus' shorthand for the way the world would be, if God's dream for the world was fulfilled.

If God got what God wanted, we would live in a world where abundance replaces scarcity, where anxiety gives way to trust, and where the myth of earning becomes the truth of belonging. Down with the lies of empire — that oppression is no more. Jesus liberates us to build a world of justice, equality, and peace.

"The Kingdom of God is at hand" is a direct attack on the domination system: for if God is king, then Caesar is not. And that means that Pilate, Caesar's governor, is illegitimate. And so are the Jewish elites who survived by collaborating with and paying tribute to Rome: not just Herod, the puppet ruler that Rome had set up, but also the religious authorities, who bought off the Romans with money from the Temple treasury.

The hope for God's Kingdom is embedded in the prayer Jesus taught his followers. The first petition of that prayer: "Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth, as in heaven" is our eternal cry for God's justice to come down, into the here and now, into the world we live in today. Whenever Christianity has become too future-focused, too much about heaven and not enough about earth, it has lost its way. Jesus calls us to follow him on the way into God's Kingdom now.

After this opening scene, Mark's Gospel becomes a metaphorical road-map, showing us the way to follow. In fact, "The Way" might almost be the title of this Gospel. It's right there in the first line, in the quote from Isaiah: prepare the way. After gathering and training his disciples, Jesus gets on with the task at hand: he leaves the countryside where he grew up, near the Sea of Galilee, and leads his followers on the road south, to Jerusalem. Day by day, week by week, he never turns aside from his purpose: to go directly to the heart of power, and speak God's truth there.

Along the way, Jesus has several symbolic encounters, through which we begin to see what it means to follow him. The journey begins and ends with Jesus healing a blind person: first a

nameless man in Bethsaida, in the north; and at the end, blind Bartimaeus, who lives in the town of Jericho, the last town before they get to Jerusalem. When Jesus has healed Bartimaeus, he says to him, "Go, your faith has saved you." But Bartimaeus will not go. Now that he can see, he too follows Jesus, all the way into Jerusalem itself.

Just before healing Bartimaeus, Jesus has an encounter with a rich man. The rich man wants to know what he must do "to inherit eternal life." Jesus won't answer him at first — maybe because eternal life is not the thing Jesus is the most concerned about. But the rich man presses him, and this is what happens: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When [the rich man] heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

The problem is, you can't carry a lot with you if you want to enter God's Kingdom. If God has blessed you, if you've got more than you can carry, think about what it would mean to give some of that away, to open your hands and your hearts and share those blessings. Doing so could mean that the person walking alongside you will be able to journey to the kingdom with you, because now they'll have enough to eat and decent shoes and a good rain jacket. We're all on this journey together, and none of us is going to make it into the Kingdom of God alone.

Mark's Gospel ends with an epic confrontation with the Empire in Jerusalem. Jesus takes over the Temple forecourt with his followers in the week before Passover, and teaches in a way that exposes the lies and hypocrisy of the religious collaborators, and the brutality and evil of the empire.

The authorities can't stand for this attack on the established order, so they arrest Jesus, and try him, and then execute him, nailed to a cross on a hill outside town, along with two bandits. There wasn't anything special about this execution: it's just how Rome dealt with political dissidents. Rome crucified hundreds of thousands of criminals. Problem solved.

Only of course, in this case, it wasn't. Because although the power of Empire rejected Jesus' message and tried to silence him in death, God vindicated Jesus and raised him to new life. And that new life he lives now, today, in us. Every time we break bread at this table; every time we pray for God's Kingdom to come on earth: we continue on the way of Jesus. We approach the time when God's dream becomes real.

Friends, we are no longer subject to the lies of Empire. Jesus has shown us God's dream for the world. We know the way into God's Kingdom. We know it won't be easy — for those of us who are rich now, it involves self-denial, emptying out, so that we can be filled with God's truth.

But this is the only way, and Jesus calls us to join him on it: "He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and

take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

Oppression and liberation; blindness and sight; death and new life. The bible is filled with good news, if you know how to read it. I hope that we will learn these stories, individually and as a community, take them to heart, and make them our own.

Amen.