



"Not From This World"
Scripture – John 18:33-37
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, November 21, 2021

In the great hall, torches were mounted on the columns, and the walls were lavishly frescoed with fruits and flowers and twisting ropes. A mosaic covered a vast portion of the floor — tiny bits of white marble, black pumice, and blue glass arranged into magnificent creatures. Fishes, dolphins, whales, and sea dragons. Looking down, I saw that I stood upon a large fish swallowing a small one. I could almost feel its tail swish. I tried hard not to be awed, but it was impossible. Wined and dazed, I moved across the mosaics as if walking upon water.¹

This description of the great hall in the palace of Herod Antipas comes from a novel called *The Book of Longings*. The author, Sue Monk Kidd, tells the story of an extraordinary young woman named Ana who — in the author's imagination — becomes the wife of Jesus of Nazareth. Ana, however, is a surprising prospect for the wife of a day laborer. She hails from a wealthy family in the next town over — the daughter of the chief scribe to Herod Antipas, the Jewish king installed by Rome to rule Galilee. Because of her father's role, Ana and her parents have access to extravagant spaces that are off limits to the majority of Galilee's residents. Unlike Ana, who now stands inside the great hall of the palace, most of the townsfolk can only stand in its shadow, gazing up at the imposing structure that serves to remind all Galileans that even the boondocks of Palestine are not beyond the reach of Rome.

As the novel begins, Herod Antipas has orchestrated a massive campaign to impress the emperor. He is building a kingdom of gleaming marble and crushed limestone and exquisite glass ... and he's doing so on the backs of poor Galileans. With no other way to feed their families, these laborers give their blood, sweat and tears to accommodate the excesses of empire. And, then — as if their work wasn't enough — they must give their hard-earned wages as well, handing over precious pennies to tax collectors, who demand whatever Caesar requires ... plus a little more to line their own pockets. Even though *The Book of Longings* is a work of fiction, this novel offers a window on the harsh realities of life under the Roman Empire. It was a world in which the powerful exploited the poor and powerless for selfish gain. While the masses starved, the elites feasted on fine wine and exotic delicacies. While commoners found shelter above their small shops or simple stables, the ruling class built monuments testifying to their power and wealth. And, when the populace made known its discontent, the empire would respond with intimidation and cruelty — arresting rabble-rousers, hanging revolutionaries on wooden crosses that too-often lined the roads. In first century Palestine, this was the way of the kingdoms of *this world*.

¹ Sue Monk Kidd, *The Book of Longings* (New York: Viking, 2020), 91.

In our Gospel reading for Reign of Christ Sunday, we meet a man who is deeply invested in the way of kingdoms of this world. Pontius Pilate was the governor of the Roman province of Judea. Though he resided in Caesarea, a coastal city far from Jerusalem, the text tells us that Pilate is in the holy city for the festival of Passover. He's not there for religious reasons, of course, as revealed by his sarcastic remarks in today's passage, "I am not a Jew, am I?" No, unlike the throngs of pilgrims who have journeyed to Jerusalem to observe the Passover, Pilate has come to maintain order. As far as Rome is concerned, the city is a tinder-box. It is packed with people who are celebrating how God delivered their ancestors — people who are all-too-ready to throw off the yoke of slavery once again. It would take little to spark rebellion.

Now, in this scene from John's Passion Narrative, Pilate seeks to determine if the man standing before him might be the one holding the match that could set this corner of the empire ablaze. "Are you the King of the Jews?" Pilate asks Jesus. It is a *political* question, pure and simple. Pilate is not interested in hearing how Jesus has offended the chief priests and Pharisees; he does not care if Jesus is God's anointed Messiah or some posturing prophet. Pilate's only concern is whether or not the defendant poses a threat to Roman rule. "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus deflects the question, so Pilate takes a different tact: "Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?"

Now, in a way, Jesus responds to Pilate's first question — neither denying his kingship nor claiming it outright. Rather, Jesus speaks a truth Pilate does not expect: "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the [authorities]. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

Having commanded Pilate's attention, Jesus steers the conversation from talk of a King to talk of a king-dom. The kingdom of which Jesus speaks is not from this world. And, yet, he has been building it in the world ever since he called his first disciples saying, "Come and See." Throughout his ministry, Jesus has been inviting others into this so-called kingdom — into a community of people who are committed to a different way, a different world.

There is the Samaritan woman — the one Jesus meets as he rests beside Jacob's Well. She has come to draw water in the heat of the day, long after others have come and gone so she'll be spared their sneering looks and snide remarks. Though this woman spends her days on the margins, Jesus offers her a place in his kingdom, saying: "Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty." He extends Living Water, and this woman of Samaria drinks deeply from the well of grace. And there is the multitude that follows Jesus to the mountainside, hungry for bread and for God's goodness. Jesus offers both. Kneeling before each man, woman, and child, he serves the barley loaves, he serves the fish. And he shares something more: his very self — the Bread of Life to satisfy their longing and sustain their spirits. And there is the man-born-blind, the one who has been rendered invisible to his community. Jesus spreads mud on the man's eyes and restores his sight. But — more than that — he offers him a new community. Jesus draws the man into the Shepherd's flock and fold, where he will enjoy the promise of abundant life.

Jesus invites each of them, he invites all of them into the community he is creating. And those who listen to his voice begin to learn the ways of God's kingdom:

*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.
Feed my sheep. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.
I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also
should love one another.*

The kingdom Jesus has been building in this world looks different from the kingdoms of this world. For it is not built of gleaming marble and crushed limestone and exquisite glass. Rather, it is built of love and grace and truth. Christ's kingdom is marked by abundance, not for the few, but for the many. And, so — where other empires would push people down and push people out — Christ's realm expands to invite everyone in. The coin of the realm is not exclusiveness, but inclusion; not exploitation, but generosity. You see, the kingdom Jesus has been building in this world does not exist to serve people in power, but to empower all people to serve — to the benefit of community and creation. As such, Christ's kingdom doesn't fit the timeworn mold recognizable to the likes of Pontius Pilate. The Roman governor has no framework for a reign characterized by self-giving love rather than self-serving power. He cannot comprehend a kingdom that is "not from this world." So Pilate seizes on the one thing he can understand: "So you are a king," he says.

As it happens, Pilate speaks the truth. For Jesus is a king; he is *the* king. It's just that his reign is unrecognizable to Pilate, and to Herod Antipas, and to everyone else who is invested in the ways of kingdoms of *this* world. For Christ is a ruler unlike any other — one who serves rather than being served; one who lays down his life rather than sacrificing the lives of his subjects, one who rules in the name of love. "My kingdom is not from this world," Jesus says. Christ's kingdom is not *from* this world; it is not *of* this world. But it is *in* this world, as it has been ever since Jesus called his first disciples, saying: "Come and see." It breaks in even here, even now — wherever those who have heard Christ's call and followed his way continue to listen to his voice, whispering: *Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*

Admittedly, his kingdom might be hard to spot at times ... If the headlines of the last year are any indication, the ways of the kingdoms of this world still hold sway. We see dissidents arrested for protesting corruption in foreign regimes. We hear that governments are vying to secure access to the rare minerals necessary to dominate new technologies. We watch sparring billionaires launch rockets in a race to corner the market on commercial space travel. All while the wealth gap around the world continues to grow. There is little to suggest the existence of a kingdom built on service. Yet, there are glimmers of hope, signs that love will find a way ... like one report coming out of Jackson, Mississippi just this week.

It is the story of a 13-year-old named Abraham.² Last year Abraham was diagnosed with a rare blood disorder. He spent the better part of a year undergoing intensive treatments — chemotherapy, radiation, a bone-marrow transplant. After all this, his doctors recommended him to the Make-A-Wish foundation, an organization that grants wishes to kids who are critically ill. Most children ask for things like a trip to Disney World, or a bedroom makeover, or a chance to meet a favorite celebrity. In fact, these are three of the most common requests Make-A-Wish Mississippi receives. But Abraham wanted something different. The day his mother learned that Abraham would qualify for a wish, she asked him: "If you could wish for anything in the world, what would it be?" His reply? "I really want to feed the homeless."

Before he got sick, Abraham and his family would go to a local park once a month to feed people experiencing homelessness. They'd serve hot meals to those in need because — as his mom puts it — "It's a blessing to be a blessing." Abraham loved the opportunity to serve others in his community. In fact, the day he was admitted to the hospital he said, "Mama, does this mean I won't get to go and feed the homeless anymore?" During his treatment, his family had to forgo their monthly ritual. But, as Abraham's condition improved, he decided he wanted to use his wish to carry on serving others. The Make-A-Wish Foundation granted Abraham's wish, vowing

² Sydney Page, "Many Make-A-Wish kids ask for a vacation. This teen asked to feed the homeless," *The Washington Post* (November 16, 2021).

to feed at least 80 people each month for a full year. So far, Abraham and his family have held two events at that same local park. And both times, they have been joined by representatives from Make-A-Wish Mississippi and members of the community. Abraham described his decision: "It was a perfect opportunity to turn something painful into something joyful." And the serendipitous outcome of his selfless request is that others have been inspired to generosity, others invited into the joy of service.

"My kingdom is not from this world," Jesus says. But it is in this world. It does not look like the kingdoms our eyes are accustomed to seeing, for it is not made of gleaming marble or crushed limestone or exquisite glass. But it is there, pushing up through the cracks in the kingdoms of this world, like a persistent flower finding its way through the cracks in the sidewalk. It is there whenever, wherever those who hear Christ's voice choose to participate in Christ's reign. Wherever those on the margins are welcomed into community. Whenever hungry people are fed. It is there in heart-led decisions to turn from the ways of this world, and commit ourselves to a kingdom built upon love and grace and truth — serving the king who lives and reigns, now and forever.

Thanksgiving Prayer – Gregory Knox Jones

Gracious God, knowing that you embrace us as your precious children and that your love for us is everlasting, we come with grateful hearts and bring our thanks to you this day.

We give you thanks

for your stunning creation and the beauty of the natural world,
for rivers and lakes that supply our water,
for rich soil and lush vegetation that provide our food,
for lumbering elephants, graceful dolphins, and soaring swallows.

We give you thanks for human life:

for the gifts of intellect and speech, for science and medicine;
for joys that lift our spirits and challenges that make us grow,
for surprises that keep life intriguing and hope that our world will overcome Covid-19.

Eternal God, we give you thanks for work to do and the will to do it;

for the encouragement and assistance of friends,
and for the marvelous gift of laughter.

Loving God, we give you thanks for family traditions and special memories,

for physical, emotional and financial support,
for taking us back when we have been surly,
and forgiving us when we have been unkind.

Generous God, we give you thanks for our nation,

built on the promise of democracy, and for those who work to preserve it;
for our country so abundant that there should be shelter and food for everyone;
for the right to voice our opinion, and opportunities to improve our communities.

Mighty God, we give you thanks for our church family:

for opportunities to hear your word in Scripture and to be stirred by music,
to speak to you in prayer, to listen for your whispers,
and to touch others with your love by touching them with our lives.

Compassionate God, you have given us so much for our lives to be rich and abundant. If this isn't wonderful, I don't know what is.

In gratitude, we join our voices together in the prayer Jesus taught his followers to pray, saying...

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.