

Sermon for Midweek of Lent 5

Date: April 6, 2022

Location: St. John's Lutheran Church, Austin, MN

Old Testament: Exodus 19:1–6

Epistle Reading: Romans 14:13–17

Gospel Reading: John 18:28–38

Sermon Text: John 18:28–38

Sermon Title: Return to the Kingdom of God

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 145:8–13

Hymns:

LSB 438 – A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth

LSB 608 – Lord, to You I Make Confession

LSB 428 – Cross of Jesus, Cross of Sorrow

LSB 648 – Glorious Things of You Are Spoken

LSB 777 – Grant Peace, We Pray, in Mercy, Lord

LSB 784 – Take My Life and Let It Be

Break Your Hearts (*Tune: LSB 512*)

LSB 451 – Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted

Liturgy:

Creative Worship



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Return to the Kingdom



Text: John 18:28–38

Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor’s headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor’s headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover. So Pilate went outside to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this man?” They answered him, “If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you.” Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.” The Jews said to him, “It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.” This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?” Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”

After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, “I find no guilt in him.

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Grace and peace, in Jesus' name. Amen.

A pastor was called to a home to offer the Commendation of the Dying for an elderly member of the congregation nearing the end of life. His words bring comfort and peace to the assembled family as they gather together to share: stories, comfort one another and await their loved one's final breath. Welcome to the Kingdom.

A young mother steps into the church of a small congregation seeking some assistance. She has just had some hard times and needs a little hand. The pastor sits with her, listens to her story, prays with her, invites her to join the congregation on Sunday, and gives her a little something to help get through the week. Welcome to the Kingdom.

A homeless man is found sleeping near a bike path, with no shoes. The man who noticed him talks with him, gets him a hot sandwich, and the next day brings a pair of shoes with an invitation to come to church. Welcome to the Kingdom.

On Sunday morning, you line up before this altar, and your Savior-King feeds you with His very own Body and Blood, taking away your sins, strengthening your faith and re-making you in His image and likeness. Welcome to the Kingdom.

What does it mean to be in the kingdom of God? Pilate struggled with understanding that very thing in today's Gospel reading. It can be hard for us to understand too; we who actually are in the kingdom of God.

Our series this Lent has focused on God's calling to us, which we first heard in the Book of Joel:

Return to the Lord your God,
for He is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love;
and He relents over disaster.¹

We've seen our own sinfulness, but we have also heard how God continues to pursue us, encouraging us to turn from our sin and calling to return to Him. Today, the invitation is for us to return to the kingdom of God. The Bible readings were intended to lead us to ponder what that really means.

We hear the phrase "kingdom of God" and tend to imagine it as a place. Maybe the kingdom of God is confined to the walls of the church, where God does some

1 Joel 2:13

of His most visible and obvious work. Certainly, it is here, but it is not limited to this place.

Maybe the kingdom of God follows the pastor around, a mobile kingdom, centered on the things that God does through some of His most humble servants. That definition doesn't seem enough either, since we have all heard stories of pastors who have fallen from grace, done terrible things that scandalized their congregations.

What if the kingdom of God is purely heavenly? Maybe it's all about the day when we will be in God's presence and under His protection after we have moved on from this earthly life. That's part of it, but that can't be all of it.

Jesus broke into this world, took on our flesh, and died for our sins. He did it all right here. You can visit the place where He was born, the places where He grew up, the place where He died. It seems silly to argue all of that happened outside the kingdom of God. If the kingdom of God is not where Jesus is, where could it possibly be?

The chief priests turned Jesus over to the Roman government that Friday morning. Their intention was clear: This man must die. Pilate tried to deescalate the whole thing but he was backed into a corner. So he brought Jesus in to try and get to the bottom of it.

“Are You the King of the Jews?” Pilate asked. This was no idle question. Pilate clearly understood what the chief priests had been up to and he had a pretty good idea of why Jesus had been turned over to him. Best to get right to the point and lay it all out on the table.

Jesus can't just answer a question like that. At least not if He hopes to be understood. Pilate has a particular understanding of what it means to be a king, and Jesus' kingship doesn't really fit into any of Pilate's categories. He could admit that He's a king but Pilate wouldn't really understand. He might think Jesus was vying for political power, that He was a threat to the Roman Empire. He's not because He is King on a whole different level.

Jesus answers with a question, “Did you come up with the question all by yourself, or did somebody tell you to ask it?”

Pilate is in no mood to play games. “Listen, I'm not a Jew, and frankly I don't care who the 'King of the Jews' might be. But You've rubbed somebody the wrong way, and they've turned You over to me. So help me understand what this is all about.”

Jesus begins to explain who He is, but Pilate never really does understand why Jesus is standing in front of him. Jesus explains, “It’s not a kingdom like you would imagine. If it were My followers would be rioting in the streets and staging a coup. But they’re not. Because it’s not that kind of kingdom. It’s something else. Something bigger. Something much more important.”

Pilate chews on that for a moment. “So You are a king?”

Jesus’ answer is, “You say that I am a king.” That might sound a little like, “Now you’re starting to get it.” He goes on to explain He is the kind of king who has come into the world to point folks to something more important than they had ever understood. He came “to bear witness to the truth.” If you get it then you get it, “Everyone who is of the truth listens to My voice.”

At that point Pilate basically gives up.

At that same place you shouldn’t, the faithful wouldn’t, because you are “of the Truth.” That is true even when you don’t fully get it, or understand it.

As I went through those events at the beginning of this message, some of you got it. You understood the “kingdom of God” is not about physical location, and it’s not about a particular group of people or even a person, save One: Jesus. It’s about Jesus. It’s about the work of the Holy Spirit. It’s about a loving God, whom we call our Father, who invites, forgives, encourages and builds up.

The kingdom of God exists everywhere the loving work of God is done. In hospital operating rooms, in substance abuse treatment programs, in food pantries, around flagpoles, and so many other places.

God calls us to be part of His reign and His rule. We are to bear witness to the work He is doing among us and to participate in it. To play a role, as hands and feet of God, in sharing His love with others, both inside the church and out. That is the kingdom to which God has called you.

Rejoice, children of God! Rejoice that you are subject to the One who created you, the One who redeemed you, the One who sanctifies you (holy-ifies you).

In Jesus’ name.

Amen.

**Proclaim God's Word,
Encourage one another in faith,
Witness to God's love and
Serve all people**

