

The Kin-Dom of God sermon series  
Know Peace – Ps. 33:13-19  
July 16, 2023  
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We're continuing our sermon series this morning on "The Kin-Dom of God." If you're new here, please know we are not negligent proof-readers (most of the time) and "kin-dom" is not a typo. It's a different way of understanding the traditional concept of the "kingdom" of God. The earthly version of kingdoms were often problematically intertwined with things like abuse of power and military dominance, neither of which relate to God's kingdom. So, as a way to capture the essence of our relational God, we're exploring what it would be like to live in the "kin-dom" of God, where everyone is connected in ways that promote justice and equality.

We take our cues for this from Jesus and his time with us on earth. Right at the beginning of his ministry he proclaims the kingdom of God is at hand, and then goes on to compare that kingdom to innocent, non-threatening things like little children and mustard seeds, which, for his followers, must really have been a shocker. Kingdoms were characterized by, well, kings, not mustard seeds. Jesus is trying to help us followers understand that God's kingdom is nothing like any of the kingdoms they've experienced on earth.

What were those earthly kingdoms like? Our psalm today gives us some clues. After telling us that God is looking down on us from heaven, it says, "A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The war horse is a vain hope for victory and by its great might it cannot be saved." Then the psalmist says something really radical: The only thing that can save those who follow God is a healthy fear of God, trusting and hoping in the One who is able to deliver us from death.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's all well and good. But the psalmist doesn't say anything about the real risks to our security we deal with every day. Not only do we have the persistent threats like gun violence and foreign countries, but a few years ago a virus reminded us just how vulnerable we really are. Remember how powerless we felt? That evokes a variety of responses, all of which can be mapped onto the Kubler-Ross model of grief: denial (this virus is a hoax!), anger (No one can make me wear a mask!), bargaining (Please let me go to Kroger just once this week), depression (the world will never be the same), and acceptance (I guess our vacation this year will be to the patio). So many Americans responded to Covid with either denial or anger, both of which persist in our country today. That makes us susceptible to conspiracy theories, fearmongers, and power-hungry manipulators.

I guarantee that's going to come into play as we ramp up for another presidential election. In our world, which seems to grow increasingly violent and chaotic every day, security is quite the buzzword. We hear candidates bemoan the lack of security in our country. They promise to stand up to rogue dictators or tout their plans to keep people out who might be a threat to us. They wrangle over who should have guns and what kind of guns and how you should be able to get or not get guns. And no one has an answer to the growing divide between law enforcement and minority groups. It feels as if our security is under constant threat.

What happens when we feel threatened? Fight or flight, and based on the latest social media feed, it seems like most American choose fight. We get defensive. We ramp up our security, buying alarm systems or spending more on the military or strengthening our borders to neutralize these threats. And doing so gives us the feeling of security. I'm not saying this is a bad thing! After all, we just installed a security system here at the church for just that reason. But it's

important that we look at how our response to threats and our efforts to secure ourselves relate to our faith and trust in God.

To be honest, they don't always relate well. Christianity often gets a bad rap as a religion for wimps. Jesus says if someone hits you, you're supposed to turn the other cheek, and instead of getting revenge your enemies, you're supposed to love them and pray for them. If our founding fathers had followed that advice, we'd all be eating fish and chips while watching "The Great British Bake-off." Wait! I do that already. Am I secretly British?!? History has proven time and time again that the only way for us to gain the comfort of security is to use the weapons and systems available to us to defend ourselves.

But that's a short-term answer to a long-term problem. If history has taught us anything, it's that a coerced peace is not really peace at all. Jesus knew that. He lived during the Pax Romana, when everyone was peaceful because they didn't want to end up on a cross. And yet, the Romans were eventually conquered, which is true for every other kingdom and empire that has existed on this earth. The prophet Isaiah says that in God's kin-dom, we'll turn swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, but we just keep making more swords and spears. So, obviously, the peace of God's kingdom cannot be found using human methods to bring about that peace.

The psalmist knows this, which is why he says that kings and warriors and war horses are not what we need to be saved from our propensity to commit violence against each other, even when we do so to achieve peace. I was reminded of this one night when I was helping one of our Cub Scout troops with their God and Country badge. We were in the sanctuary and I was explaining to two of them the meaning of our stained-glass windows. We got to the window with the symbol for peace. I asked them what kind of branch they thought this was. One boy said the branch was from an oak tree and the other said it was part of a grapevine. They argued back and forth a bit and then – as young boys sometimes do – they actually starting pushing each other and throwing punches. In the church sanctuary. Over the meaning of a symbol for peace. The struggle is real, y'all. Peace is hard.

But that's not a reason to stop seeking it, is it? Look, we've tried to make the peace of God's kin-dom real here on earth using human methods. How are we doing with that? Maybe it's time to follow the lead of the Prince of Peace, who had no military entourage and said the best thing to do with your enemies is to love them, pray for them, and bless them. Trying to kill them hasn't worked so well, so maybe we should reconsider what it means to live out God's kin-dom here on earth. Or, maybe we admit that the work we've done to try and secure peace in our world is antithetical to who God calls us to be. Jesus' peace is not coerced. Instead, it is built upon our trust in God.

The peace Jesus promises us is the kind that builds a kin-dom, that connects us to each other at the deepest human level. It's easy to hate someone who is a stranger. It's much harder to hate someone we see as a fellow human. Richard Rohr writes, "Hate makes the world go around. Once you have a specific thing to hate, it takes away your fear." We've bought into the lie that life is more peaceful when we have an enemy we can fight against, because then peace is defined by an absence of conflict, not by God's shalom. Buddhist nun Pema Chodron said, "The way to stop war is to stop hating the enemy." But we need enemies, don't we? That's how we know who to fight in order to make ourselves safe and impose peace in our world. And yet, there are no enemies in the kin-dom of God.

God's peace will not come to this earth in one large, supernatural act. It will come through thousands of simple acts, done daily, done for each other, done for those not like us.

Peace will not come through force or coercion, through vanquishing kings and war horses. It will come through sacrifice, something as small as letting someone else go first in line or paying for the person's drink behind you or loving someone even when they're being a grinch. When the resurrected Jesus appeared to his fear-filled disciples and said, "Peace be with you," his next act was to show them his wounds, his pierced hands and side. We are all wounded, aren't we? Christ's peace will not come from inflicting more wounds, but from helping each other heal.

In the passage from Ephesians, in which Paul encourages us to put on the full armor of God, he mentions six spiritual weapons at our disposal, but only one of them is an offensive weapon: the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. The other five are for defense only. It's like the movie "The Karate Kid," when Daniel tells Mr. Miagi that he wants to learn karate so that he can get revenge against the Cobra Kai. But Mr. Miagi teaches Daniel things like "wax on, wax off" and "paint the fence" and "side to side," only later to show Daniel how such simple moves become powerful defenses against attack. Faith does not call for acts of aggression, but acts of resistance.

You see, seeking God's peace doesn't mean sitting around while others are harmed, or being a passive doormat for bullies in the name of faith. Paul tells us that such simple things as telling the truth and speaking up for justice and seeking peace can be powerful weapons of defense the forces seeking violence. Mr. Miagi doesn't teach Daniel to karate chop his way through life, but he prepares him to defend himself when the time comes. Four times in this passage Paul tells us the same thing. "Stand firm." The original Greek is actually a military term, probably referring to the defensive fighting positions of the Roman legions. Stand firm.

Stand firm when the forces of evil are at work in your life. Stand firm when you are tempted to do something you know you shouldn't. Stand firm when choosing between the easy way and the right way. Stand firm when telling the truth will cause you more pain than telling a lie. Stand firm when acknowledging your faith will be more embarrassing than hiding it. Stand firm when fighting for peace is more costly than staying on the sidelines. Stand firm against anything that will separate you from God. We can't sit back and wait for peace to happen. As citizens of God's kin-dom, we owe it to our brothers and sisters to stand firm against the kings and warriors perpetrating violence.

Our desire for security in this world is understandable, even prudent. There's a reason we lock our doors at night. And yet, deep down we realize that no amount of security in this world can save us. Doesn't matter how many guns you own, you can still get cancer. Our pursuit of security goes awry when it replaces our trust in God. Nothing we do on this earth will save us from death. Being human has a 100% mortality rate. Our true salvation comes from our faith in God and our trust that, no matter what this world throws at us, God is with us.