
What Kingdom Do You Hail From?

[Listen to the podcast.](#)

**A sermon by the Reverend Canon Beth Knowlton
Last Sunday After Pentecost**

I will never forget my early days of seminary. It was a time I approached with excitement and enthusiasm. After a long period of discernment and waiting, I was ready to begin. I remember rushing to campus as soon as books for the fall semester were in stock so I could see what would be my reading for the next months. Passing comfortably by my old stomping grounds at the CDC on the way to Candler felt like a natural extension of one career to the next. From public policy work to seminary did not seem like too big a change. Different landscapes, but of a piece in terms of how I viewed the world. I had gone into public health to make the world a better place, so becoming a priest seemed like a natural extension of that work.

What I was not prepared for in those early days was the announcement made on a Tuesday morning right before one of our first History of Christian Thought classes. As I sat in the auditorium that would continue to form me for the next three years, my professor Dr. Hackett said upon entering the room, "Apparently there are some reports of planes that have crashed into the World Trade Center. We will pray as we await further information."

After class we all raced to Brooks Commons where there was a crowd gathered around the TV watching the now familiar images of smoke billowing, people fleeing for their lives, and towers collapsing in ways I could have never imagined. I immediately realized that something primal had shifted in our country, but also in my own life. Had I been working at the CDC, my role in the Office of the Director would have been an immediate call to action. There would have been briefing papers to prepare, emergency response teams to assist in deploying, and health surveillance systems to consult. All hands would have been on deck and I could have expected some very long days in the immediate future.

As a seminary student, I was instead unsure what to think. I had gone from providing answers, data, and response in an emergency to now wondering what theological answers could possibly make sense of such horror. With no immediate task at hand, I was instead forced to be present to a whole host of emotions in myself and within my community. While becoming a priest had seemed like a natural extension to helping people, I now realized that I was in a completely foreign country. As I sat at St. Barthomew's Church that night for an impromptu service like many that were held throughout the country that night, the words from the New Zealand Prayer Book have stayed with me. And I never hear them without thinking of 9/11.

Lord, it is night.

The night is for stillness. Let us be still in the presence of God.

It is night after a long day. What has been done has been done; what has not been done has not been done; let it be.

The night is dark. Let our fears of the darkness of the world and of our own lives rest in you.

The night is quiet. Let the quietness of your peace enfold us, all dear to us, and all who have no peace.

The night heralds the dawn. Let us look expectantly to a new day, new joys, new possibilities.

In your name we pray. **Amen.**

This prayer captured the fullness of our confusion without easy answers and allowed us to declare hope in the midst of a tragedy so overwhelming there seemed to be no hope. It was amazing to me that it had not been written specifically for the occasion, yet so perfectly prayed words for those of us who were suddenly without words or comprehension. Had I been further along in my theological studies, I might also have selected the reading we hear this morning from St. Paul. He says to the Colossians,

"May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

Paul's letter to the Colossians reminds us that who we are and how we view the world as Christians is a very different kingdom than the one we originally hailed from. We have an assurance through Christ that we have been given a strength we could not have absent his presence. And, we are assured a wholeness that available only through his redemption of all of creation.

But to live into this new reality is a life long journey. This encouragement is given to the Colossians as they attempt to sort through what life in this new kingdom entails. Do they keep some of their old ways, or discard them completely. Who are the teachers they can trust? They are trying to work through competing schools of thought, diversity of religious practice, and competing loyalties. And they hear in this letter a wholeness of vision that can help them navigate the new world they now find themselves in.

This is knowledge that is never more dear to us or more important than when we find ourselves suddenly in a new place. And unfortunately those new places are often the Good Fridays we did not anticipate or see coming.

This last Sunday of Pentecost is always a bit jarring to me. I would hope we might end the liturgical year on a nicer note than a criminal asking Jesus to remember him in paradise. As I look for an invitation into a reflective and peaceful Advent, I want an uplifting or encouraging image to hang on to. A reservoir of peace I can access to immunize myself against the frenetic pace of our culture that has already convinced me I am hopelessly behind on my Thanksgiving dinner preparations, developing a shopping strategy for Black Friday, or selecting the picture for our annual Christmas card that I have about a fifty percent chance of sending out if I manage to get them printed in the first place.

If I am supposed to be a citizen of a new kingdom, untroubled by the powers of this world, shouldn't I be able to be immune to all of these petty stresses? And isn't some invitation to remove myself from horror of the world more helpful than looking directly into the scandal of the cross?

But the trouble with the liturgical year, is that while it is a helpful pattern of experiencing the life cycle of our spiritual journey, our real lives rarely line up that nicely. And while I might prefer to think of Advent as a quiet and peaceful escape from holiday stress, that misses the whole scriptural witness which points to the second coming of Christ. Which is far more about reconciling all the evil and corruption of the world than preparing a nice inner crib to receive the baby Jesus.

And while I wish it were not true, my experience is that while I think I will pay attention to the quiet invitation, frankly it is often the unexpected diagnosis, the horrific accident, the broken relationship, or a national tragedy that captures our attention and quickly relegates the pettiness of our usual concerns to really ask the question, "who is Christ for me today?"

This is not to say we should all seek out the depressing darkness and remind ourselves not to be bound by it. No, it is really the acknowledgement that the power of darkness is real. And if we have had the grace to find a different identity in Christ, it is not to avoid the darkness but to realize that we are honor bound to carry that light back into it. To shine a path of hope for those who are still imprisoned in the dark.

And some days, it is even us who might need the reminding. Because our journey is made up of a lifetime of new territory and invitations in the journey. Sometimes we are the bearers of light and others we are the ones struggling for new vision. Again, Paul has some advice for us. "So we hold fast to the hope of Christ and gather as his Body to be that for one another. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first

place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross."

May that vision guide us in whatever territory we find ourselves.

Amen

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.*