

War of the Worlds

JOHN 18:33-37A (NRSV) *Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"* ³⁴*Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"* ³⁵*Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?"* ³⁶*Jesus answered, "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 Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."* ³⁷*Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?"* Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.

In 1938, Orson Wells presented a radio adaptation of an 1897 Novel, *War of the Worlds*. The novel was one of the earliest stories to detail a conflict between mankind and an extraterrestrial race.

The show was an hour long, and the first forty minutes were presented as a news bulletin. It was said the program led to widespread panic by listeners who believed the events were real. Later critics said the panic was exaggerated by newspapers to discredit radio as a valid source of information.

War of the Worlds. Creatures from outer space. Jesus and the writers of the epistles suggest that we live in a different kind of "War of the Worlds": the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world.

When Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you a king?" he assumed an earthly kingdom with geographical and political aspects. But Jesus' kingdom is radically unlike any kingdom, government, or political ideology the world has known.

In this series of sermons, I hope, first of all, to show that the kingdom Jesus came to establish is "not from this world", because it operates differently from any government of the world—past or present.

The idea for the series comes from Gregory Boyd, although his book makes a totally different point. The title of his book is somewhat self-explanatory: *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power is Destroying the Church*. His book is critical of evangelical churches for what he calls their "nationalistic and political idolatry." He continues, "To a frightful degree, I think, evangelicals fuse the kingdom of God with a preferred version of the kingdom of the world..."

Note that Boyd is a pastor of a large evangelical church. I happen to agree with him; but it was one of his secondary points that got my attention, and became the focus for this series of sermons. That point emerges out of the distinction between the kingdom of God and the kingdom—or kingdoms—of the world.

I'm not saying Christians shouldn't be involved in politics, nor that our faith and moral convictions shouldn't inform our participation in the political process. The issue is far more basic than that. But I am suggesting that any idea that finding

the right political path has anything to do, directly, with advancing the kingdom of God, is in error.

Let's look at those worldly kingdoms: wherever a person or group exercises power over others, there is a version of the kingdom of the world. It may come in many forms, it may be oppressive or benevolent; but, virtually always it is shaped as "power over". Even democracies, in which the people have a say in who their rulers will be, "power" is exercised, and, historically speaking, too often in some illegitimate way. "Power corrupts; and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Power, in this regard, is the ability to coerce compliance by threat of force—the ability to punish, or to grant or withhold benefits. Jesus sometimes used the metaphor of the sword to describe this kind of power.

All worldly kingdoms or governments seek to establish, protect, and advance specific ideals and values; and to do that, they must control behavior and produce conformity to certain standards of conduct.

And that's not altogether bad. Humanity is broken—in theology, the word is "fallen;" otherwise, there'd be no need for laws or a sword to enforce them. The sword is part of our common curse, necessary to maintain order and peace.

But, as effective as a raised sword may be in producing conformity, it cannot bring about internal change. A kingdom can stipulate that murder will be punished, but it can't change a person's desire to kill. The only reason some people don't kill may be that they don't want to be imprisoned or executed. Their motives may be entirely self-serving; but, a worldly kingdom doesn't really care, so long as they conform to the law. Laws enforced by the sword, can control behavior, but cannot change hearts.

But, is there another way? While worldly kingdoms acquire and exercise power over others; the kingdom of God, announced by Jesus, exercises power under others, and expands by exercising the power of self-sacrificial, Calvary-like love. That's the sub-point that got my attention in Gregory Boyd's book.

It's in the fallen nature of human governments to want to "win." In contrast, the kingdom of God, announced by Jesus, seeks to be faithful to the self-giving character of God, and in so doing, reveals the most beautiful, dynamic, and transformative power in the universe. This power transforms people from the inside out.

While the way of the kingdom of God is simple, straightforward, and uncompromising, the way of the kingdom of the world is always complex, ambiguous, and inevitably full of compromises. That's why people in the same denomination or even the same congregation can—and often do—disagree about how their faith and values should inform their involvement in the kingdom of the world.

I don't claim an ability to resolve the ambiguities between the two kingdoms.

What I do hope to accomplish in these sermons is a clear vision of the unique nature of the kingdom of God as revealed in the life of Jesus, to show how its Calvary-like way of affecting change in people's lives and in society is completely different from the world's, and to see the great harm that results when Jesus' disciples fail to preserve the uniqueness of that way.

New Testament scholar, John Dominic Crossan, makes a crucial point in his book, *Who Is Jesus?* His point is "...not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally."

The Bible is full of symbolism and metaphor, and Crossan points to a critical error that has resulted in massive misunderstandings within the Christian community. From the kingdom parables of Jesus to the apocalyptic visions in Revelation, if we are to understand fully the kingdom of God, it is crucial that we honor the metaphoric imagery used in so many New Testament references.

In Luke 4, for example, the Devil tempts Jesus by showing him "all the kingdoms of the world," and saying, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours" (Luke 4:5-7). Jesus, of course, would not worship the Devil. But note: neither does he dispute the Devil's claim to own them.

Metaphors describe realities normal descriptive language is incapable of describing; in this case the cosmic force that is hostile to God and whose influence is toward evil. Three times, Jesus refers to Satan as "the ruler of this world" (12:31; 14:30; 16:11). Paul agrees, calling Satan "the god of this age" and "the ruler of the power of the air" (2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2).

Thus is established the biblical distinction: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. And the kingdom of this world is not merely a human kingdom; nor is the kingdom of God entirely other-worldly. There are forces at work in each that transcend our comprehension [*that's key!*]; and there are earthly dimensions in each; and each is totally integrated in the other. And that reality—that contrast—that mystery—is what makes metaphor an absolute necessity.

In 1981 I stood with friends at the American military cemetery in Florence Italy. In appearance, it is much like the one at Arlington, Virginia. There was a hushed reverence as we viewed the white crosses standing in formation. A friend, an elder in the church I was serving, said, "Jim, that's the residue of power."

Historians estimate that in the 20th century alone over 200 million people died because of war and political conflict. The evil implied in that statistic surpasses any violent tendencies of the fallen human heart. It represents one of those forces beyond our comprehension. It makes sense only by use of metaphor: description of the destructive nature of the ruler of the kingdom of this world.

Paul writes, *“For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places”* (EPH 6:12 NRSV).

I think some of us “liberal” preachers have been avoiding those cosmic powers of this present darkness, because we couldn’t explain them. I still can’t explain them; but, I’ve read the last chapter. In the Sundays during November, I’ll be sharing the good news of the kingdom of God. And we’ll be looking at the life and the teachings of Jesus regarding that cosmic power.