

Sermon: November 21, 2021

“Not On the Bucket List”

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Scripture: Revelation 1:4b-8 and John 18:33-37

Bitter billionaire hospital magnate Edward Cole finds himself in the cancer ward contemplating the end of his life. As a man of some means, he expects a private room as he attempts some semblance of convalescence, but the hospital knows that this caustic, unethical man does not deserve such courtesy. They force Edward to bunk with a car mechanic called Carter Chambers. Carter and Edward could not be more different. Edward is a four-times divorced man whose one and only daughter has nothing to do with him. Carter is a happily married father of three. On getting his terminal diagnosis, Carter begins making a list for what he wants to do before he “kicks the bucket.” The two men form an unlikely friendship around this idea and Edward becomes determined to help Carter accomplish everything on his bucket list, adding a few things for himself as well.

It’s a story of friendship and discovery with a moving end that will bring you to tears. If the above story sounds familiar, it is because it’s the plot to 2007 film called *The Bucket List*, starring Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman. This concept of a “bucket list” has since caught on in our culture, with people everywhere remarking on what they might add to their own bucket lists. I’ve even seen little notebooks at bookstores with “Bucket List” engraved on the cover. It’s a very modern idea, born of dreams and the hopes of time enough to cross every item off that list even if perhaps we never will. It’s also a very western idea in many cases, especially as

portrayed in this film. While many people want to travel somewhere special before they die (for me, that's Florence, Italy), making a long list suggests you have or expect to have the means someday to do all of those things. It's an idea born of the ideals of a society like ours. It's not about the time you spend with loved ones, it's more about the stuff you get to do.

This idea of a bucket list is a funny one in the light of Christ the King Sunday, particularly as relates to our gospel passage. Prior to this, Jesus has fulfilled a bucket list of sorts, I suppose. But it's a bucket list born of the urgent nature of his mission. It's a bucket list that is, really, the antithesis of a 21st century American bucket list. Jesus's mission is to save humanity from itself. To spread the message of the kingdom of God throughout the region, teaching and preaching across Judea, Samaria, Galilee in order to get that message throughout the world. His journey hits its apex in his moments in the upper room with the disciples during the last supper and culminates in his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But today's gospel message gives us none of that. Instead, we pick up, the 18th chapter of John and find Jesus standing before Pilate being questioned before he is finally sentenced and put to death. Jesus knows what's to come and so do we, but the tension in the story remains.

Pilate puts to Jesus the question of whether he is king of the Jews. Knowing Pilate does not believe him to be a king of anything, but understanding that Pilate knows how high the stakes are here, Jesus turns the question around. Pilate presses further, finally asking Jesus what he's done that his own people have turned him in. We have to remember here that if Jesus admitted to believing himself "king of the Jews," which he surely does not, Pilate would have reason to execute him. Anyone claiming

kingship over the Roman empire would be considered an insurrectionist. Instead, Jesus responds by taking the question of kingship and instead making it about *kingdom*—but not a kingdom as Pilate or anyone else present would understand it.

No, all throughout the gospels, Jesus is telling us that his way, the way of God, is not the way of the world. His kingdom, he says, is not like the kingdoms of this world. It's not even from this world. If it were, he would have let Peter continue his assault and allowed his people to fight on his behalf. But he doesn't do that. Instead, he tells Peter to put away his sword and peacefully lets himself be taken into custody. Jesus has one more thing on the list that his Father has set out for him, and violence committed on his behalf isn't a part of that.

He stands before Pilate and offers a defense that says, my kingdom isn't from this world. In other words, he's noting that he's not a political threat. He's not here to incite an insurrection or take down Rome. Jesus's way is much more subversive than that. It's counter to the Roman culture, it's counter to the philosophy of the empire as the world understands it. It's not about power *over* others, but about power *with*. Power alongside. A peaceable kingdom in which justice and mercy reign. There's nowhere on earth in that time or this one where that's the case. The kingdom over which Jesus is to be king is not like the kingdoms of this world. It is not won through bloodshed and violence—it is not an exercise in power for the sake of power, oppression of those we see as threats, though there's plenty of that on the way there, it seems.

Our other reading today pulls from that book of the Bible we like to pretend isn't there . There's much symbolic language in the closing bookend of our biblical canon, Revelation, and there's at least as much out there in the way of interpretation about what the "end times" may look like. We don't have time today for a diatribe on this enigmatic book, but we can spend a few moments looking at the first words of John of Patmos in this letter.

Whenever we look at it, we must keep in mind that this book was written in metaphorical language so that it would make it off the island where he sat in exile during his persecution under the rule of the emperor Domitian late in the first century of the common era.

Like the apostle Paul did in his letters, John begins by offering grace and peace to his intended recipient before launching into a re-imagining of the world, an alternative to the brutality of the Roman Empire. It's a difficult book to grapple with, but this brief passage we get today begins not with the wild and often violent imagery that is to come, but instead with the beautiful vision of Christ, who is and who was and who is to come, descending gently from the clouds. Christ not as the man nailed to the cross, but as the One enthroned in glory, as ruler of all things, the Alpha and the Omega. The Almighty. He is, in every way, the King we think of on this final day in the church calendar.

But this image, which every eye will see, also makes all the tribes wail, and thus begins the language of the shocking vision that John has seen and that he wishes to communicate to the world beyond Patmos. The language is meant to shake Christians from their complacency, to indicate the urgency of their mission of living into the values of the kingdom *now*, and not waiting for some far off then. So many of the evangelical interpreters of

this book point us to an end time in which the “right” people will be lifted into the clouds while the “wrong” people undergo trials. They stand back in gleeful judgement, assuming themselves to be the high and mighty who will ascend to heaven, while they shake their heads at the rest of us poor saps who don’t believe rightly and will be “left behind.”

In their judgement, they misread not just Revelation, but the message of Jesus who focused a whole lot more on people living into kingdom values *now* than he did on some imagined future end time. Jesus doesn’t put the kingdom values on his bucket list, he lives them in his life, death, and resurrection. He doesn’t mean for us to wait, he means for us to be his body in the world *now*.

The Kingdom of God is not on my bucket list and do you know why? Because it’s not meant to be a bucket list item. It’s not something that you get to cross off after you reach it because it’s not something to be attained, it is something to work toward. It’s a way of being. A way of doing. A way of living. A way of loving. That’s the meaning of Christ’s birth, sacrifice, and death: the Light of the World shines toward a better way of *being*. We’re called to do the work *now*, not later. Not when things are perfect. Not when Christ finally comes in glory. Not when we retire or have time. Now.

There’s a lot of talk about sin in our culture. There’s a lot of worry over who people love and whether they identify as the gender they were assigned at birth. But I have to tell you folks, in reading the gospels closely, you’ll find Christ is a whole lot less interested with what happens in someone’s bedroom or with us judging one another than he is about how we are treating one another *now*. When Christ calls us to repentance, it’s not so

that we can get some imagined reward, but so that we are forced to admit that the way we're living now is not right. It's not just. It's not merciful. It's not loving. It's not Christlike. Christ calls us to repentance so that we can see that there's another way. It's not repent and return. It's repent and revolt. It's repent of the way things are and revolt into the way of Christ. It's repentance of the death-dealing ways of this world and revolution into the life-giving ways of the kingdom of God.

We say week after week when we say the Lord's Prayer together, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done." And I have to wonder if we really mean those words. Or do we just pay them lip-service? Because if we mean them, then we need to remember that they are words of intent. The UCC's own Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay writes, "Those are declarative, not interrogative, statements. In reciting them, we do not ask for it to be so, we commit to its realization." The book of Revelation is not just a book of scary metaphorical language, it is a warning of the urgency of living into kingdom values *now*. It is a vision of, in the words of Rev. Dr. Lindsey, "the hope of the realization" of God's kingdom *actually come. Now*.

By the end of *The Bucket List*, the caustic, selfish, bitter billionaire Edward has learned that a life that is all about me, me, me was not the way to live. As he gives the eulogy at Carter's funeral, he crosses off, "help a complete stranger for a common good" from his list. He learns that it's not how he's being treated that matters ultimately, but how he treats others. He learns, in short, the importance of loving his neighbor as he loves himself.

Folks like to talk a lot these days about what is wrong with the world. We rail against generations behind our own as though they're the problem with

today's society. But, do you want to know what's really wrong with the world? It's not who I marry or whether your perceived freedoms are being "stripped" from you. It's not how much screen time the kids are getting or the fact that a dollar isn't worth what it used to be. What's wrong with the world is a whole lot bigger and more simple than that. What's wrong with the world is that we're living by the *ways of the world* and not "The Way" of Jesus of Nazareth. What's wrong with the world is that we've identified ourselves as citizens of a nation first and beloved children of the living God last. What's wrong with the world is that we're living like we're the only ones who matter instead of remembering that we belong to each other.

It seems to me that on this Reign of Christ Sunday we have a choice: We can decide that we want to go on as we have been. We can decide that getting our own way is the meaning of life. We can decide we want to care only for ourselves and forget everyone else because they're not our problem.

Or we can decide that we want to participate in living the kind of life Christ wanted us to live. We can decide to treat others as co-equal bearers of the beloved image of God.

We can decide we belong first to the kingdom of man or we can decide that we belong first to God and to each other. The choice is ours to make.

Amen.