



Sermon by: Rev. Teresa Larson
Text: Luke 12:22-31

November 24, 2024

Walking the Good Road

Before we turn to today's second reading I want to share a quick word about the translation of scripture chosen for today, which is different from the New Revised Standard Version found in the pew Bibles.

Today's readings come from the *First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament*. It was published in 2020 out of a desire to provide an English Bible that connects in culturally relevant ways to the traditional languages of the six-million English-speaking Native American people. The translation attempts to honor the cultural tradition of oral storytelling and a particular way of speaking, with simple yet profound beauty and rich cultural idioms.

In addition to the land acknowledgement, this translation was selected for this Sunday before Thanksgiving as a way of recognizing the history around the holiday that has been sanitized of its roots in colonialism and genocide of Indigenous people. We also give thanks to the first stewards of this land we inhabit, and the rich Native history woven in the fabric of our country. As we approach this holiday weekend, may we practice gratitude and work to end violence and injustice in all its modern forms every day.

And with that...hear these words from Shining Light Tells the Good Story (Luke) 12:22-31:

Then Creator Sets Free (Jesus) said to the ones who walked the road with him, "This is why I am telling you not to be troubled about getting enough to eat or drink, or what to wear. Is eating, drinking, and clothing yourself all there is? Does your life not have more meaning?"

"Look to the ravens, the winged ones who fly above us. Do they plant seeds and gather the harvest into a storehouse? No! But the Great Spirit gives them plenty to eat. Do you not know he cares even more for you? Will worrying about these things help you live one hour longer? If you cannot do such a small thing, why worry about other things?"

"Have you seen how the wildflowers grow in the plains and meadows? Do you think they work hard and long to clothe themselves? No! I tell you, not even the great chieftain Stands in Peace (Solomon), wearing his finest regalia, was dressed as well as even one of these.

"If the Great Spirit covers the wild grass in the plains with such beauty, which is here today and gathered for tomorrow's fire, will he not take even better care of you? Why is your faith so small? Why worry so much about what to eat or drink? This is what the Nations of the world, who have lost their way, have given their hearts to, but your Father from above knows you need these things.

“If you will make Creator’s good road your first aim, he will make sure you have all you need for each day. Do not fear, for even though you are a small flock, it makes your Father’s heart glad to give you the good road!”¹

Today our journey through the church’s liturgical year comes to an end. The journey began last Advent in December 2023; moved from the anticipation of Advent to the light of Epiphany through January and February; turned into the reflective season of Lent for March; threaded through the Eastertide and Pentecost season in April and May; coasted through Ordinary Time during the summer and fall; and it all comes full circle today: Christ the King Sunday. A culmination of the church year that celebrates the reigning-over of Jesus Christ, “ruler of the kings of the earth.” Next Sunday we flip our calendars to a new month, to Advent, and a new liturgical year begins all over again.

It’s a rare occurrence that Christ the King Sunday gets a full Sunday to itself around here (though this is the second year in row that it has happened). Normally, Christ the King Sunday falls on Stewardship Dedication Sunday, so the stewardship theme appropriately becomes the driving theme of the day. And truthfully, I’ve really been okay with not necessarily ignoring Christ the King Sunday, but not really leaning into it too much.

The day raises some unsettling images around the overt patriarchy and hierarchy in just the phrase, “Christ the King.” Prominent images of crowns, thrones, and scepters stand in sharp contrast to the more humbling images of Jesus with a crown of thorns, washing the disciples’ feet, or carrying a shepherd’s crook.

That said, the history around how this day ended up on the liturgical calendar offers an opportunity to mark the day for what it was intended for – to reclaim the images and concepts of authority through a lens of the kingdom that Christ ushers in.

In 1925, following World War I, Pope Pius the X set forth a feast day as a response to the rise of communism in what had just become the Soviet Union and to what he saw as increasing secularism in the west. (It was also, notably, the same year that Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* was published and the same year that Mussolini became dictator in Italy.) The pope was alarmed by the trend toward nationalism and totalitarianism that was leading people of faith to believe that their highest loyalty must be to their nation and its government rather than to Christ and his way of discipleship. Thus, a feast day was created to remind the faithful that we serve a higher authority than earthly rulers. Unlike tyrants and dictators, Jesus Christ alone is the just and faithful one who will ultimately bring order and peace to the world.

Especially in a day and age when Christian Nationalism has a frightening hold on our collective imagination, it’s even more important that the church observes Christ the King Sunday. We have an invitation to both acknowledge and condemn the ways Christianity has been (and continues to be) misused to justify violence and oppression, and at the

same time, reclaim who we believe Christ is and what Christ calls us to do. We reaffirm our allegiance to Christ alone and recommit ourselves to doing our part in bringing about the kingdom of God; a term used by Jesus to describe the kind of world he as the messiah had come to bring. A world where power is exercised through relationships that nurture trust and honor the sacredness of every life with precious regard for those who are marginalized because of how they look, how they think, where they are from, and who God created them to be.

Artist Scott Erickson distinguished the kingdom of God in this way: “you can destroy everyone who has differing opinions about *your* way – eradicating all innate agency and uniqueness of the world – and end up with a government based on the rule of compliance and the threat of shameful destruction – a kingdom of fear.

“Or you can deeply love everyone and eternally offer your vulnerable self as a loving way that overcomes fear, selfishness, greed, and death – prizing all innate agency and uniqueness found in the world as the very cornerstone on which to build a government focused on loving others as one loves themselves – a kingdom of God.”²

That said, it’s interesting that the First Nations Version chooses to not use language that gives Jesus any divine royal status or refers to the “kingdom of God” in any way. Instead, the translation substitutes “the kingdom of God” with “the good road.” Listen to this example from today’s reading...this is verse 32:

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”
(NRSV)

“Do not fear, for even though you are a small flock, it makes your Father’s heart glad to give you the good road!”
(First Nations Version)

This translation choice acknowledges that the kingdom of God is much more than a lofty, final destination we will only arrive at in God’s good time, but a journey that God has set us on marked by grace, freedom, abundance – and as we heard from the Gospel reading, a good road where we do not worry and we are not afraid. God intends more for us on the good road than a life full of worry and fear – and, in fact, entire nations lose their way *because* they worry and they fear. Out of the worry and fear, nations inflict deep harm and violence on themselves and others trying to create a world they deem safe for only themselves.

Especially in these days of deep division and distress, “do not worry or fear” seems like an impossible invitation; “come Lord Jesus, come” feels like the only appropriate prayer.

This brings us to a bit of a crossroads at the end of the liturgical year. If Christ is King (the reclaimed images of a humble, relational king) and God gives us “the good road,” then why is it that there is so much that is worrisome and fearful?

This is a big paradox to hold, and we can tie ourselves into impossible theological knots trying to sort it out. There are a lot of responses out there that attempt to ease those knots, and we will wrestle with these knots for the rest of our days – in fact, doing so is a practice of good road itself. Yet we cannot let those knots distract us from walking the good road or sidetrack us from living a way of life that God intends and is pleased to give. There are ideologies and beliefs across every cultural and political spectrum around the world that strive to pull us off the good road and seek to hold our imaginations captive, actively manufacturing fear and hopelessness as a way to hold power. It's important that we acknowledge our propensity to these things, but that we do not become these things. Episcopal priest David Zuhl said it best: Christians just don't do hopelessness.³ We do deep concern for what isn't right or just. We do lament for the things that ought not be and we wish were different. And then we do something. We do not become so consumed with worry or fear that we are paralyzed into inaction.

Instead, we walk this good road that God is pleased to give: a life marked by generosity, by grace, by care for one another, by tending to those that society does not, by joining in solidarity with neighbors near and far. A life marked by assurance, not worry. A life marked by hope and a deeply, deeply held belief that the good road God gives us leads us to making a world where all are safe, housed, fed, have what they need, and are not afraid.

God has given us this good road and we cannot cede it. We can only recommit ourselves to it, again and again and again. We recommit ourselves to Christ the King, and to the power that comes from being in loving relationship with one another and being in a community that orients its life around resurrection. There are others that walk the good road with us. We travel together and we hold faith together. We are the Church together – the best, most joyful, most sacred group project there could ever be.

As we close out this liturgical year and prepare to begin a new one, may we recommit ourselves to the good road. We don't know what the next liturgical year and all its seasons have in store. But we know that the liturgical seasons always arrive right on time to guide our journey, and we know who we commit to being, who we commit to following, and the road that we commit to walking. May we travel the good road well, always with gratitude for the one who gives it to us: who loves us, calls us, sends us out, and will never let us go. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ *First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament*. InterVarsity Press, 2021.

² Scott Erickson, *Honest Advent*, 2020, p. 75.

³ David Zuhl, "Loving the Hell Out", *The Mockingcast*. Podcast audio, November 18, 2024.