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For Thine is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory, Forever!
 Luke 1:46-53

I've always loved children's Christmas pageants – preschoolers dressed as angels, with flapping wings and wire halos; toddlers, in sleepers, with cotton balls stuck to their bottoms, playing sheep joyfully braying “baaaaa;” camels lurching down the aisle, followed by shepherds, and an innkeeper crossing his arms and shaking his head, “There's no room.” So Mary and Joseph wander the chancel searching for a place for the Christ-child to be born. A curtain is drawn and then the newborn Messiah is presented, although one year she is 14 months old and tells the congregation, “hi!” Messiahs are, of course, precocious.

But there's a part of the story we never tell. It's recorded by Matthew right after the wise men present their gifts, *“Being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi return to their country by another route. Then an angel warns Joseph, “Take your family and flee to Egypt, for Herod wants to kill the child.”*

There it is: two rival Kingdoms battling for power, a battle we see all throughout Scripture. God tells Adam and Eve that they have freedom, but within limits. But the serpent whispers to Eve, *“Taste this fruit, and your eyes will be opened and you will become like God.”* The prophets declare, *“God has shown you, what is good – to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.”* But *“your hands are blood-stained. You lie and steal, practice injustice and the courts are corrupt. Rather than peace, you create destruction and ruin.”*

Two rival kingdoms battling for power. Mighty Caesar Augustus, known to his subjects as Lord and Savior, creates the *Pax Romana*, the Roman peace, but by the sword. So what if he kills tens of thousands and makes one out of every three inhabitants of the Empire a slave! Then to increase his tax revenue, he lifts a finger, orders a census and sends tens of thousands of common people, like Mary and Joseph, scurrying to their hometown to register.

This morning we conclude our series of sermons on the Lord's Prayer, reflecting on *“For Thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory, forever. Amen.”* In the time of Jesus, these words are revolutionary, for at this time, Judea is a hotbed of fervor and hatred towards Rome. Decades earlier, Rome invades Judea, burns cities, enslaves the population, seizes food as peasants starve, and idolatrously put the image of Caesar on coins. The tax rate soars to seventy percent; Roman soldiers swagger through villages fondling women and beating up men who dare to protest. And in an act of ultimate blasphemy, they place Rome's symbol, a golden eagle, over the temple's main gate. So countless self-proclaimed Messiahs arise declaring God's imminent judgment.

So that's why Jesus both arouses and frustrates His followers. He can calm a storm, cast out demons and raise the dead, so why doesn't He call for an angelic army to destroy Rome. One of His disciples is Simon the Zealot, a man committed to Rome's overthrow, but Jesus teaches, *"If a Roman soldier forces you to carry his 80 pound pack one mile, carry it two miles . . . Instead of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth . . . love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."* Jesus descends from the Mount of Olives during Passover, on our Palm Sunday, at the precise time the Messiah is due to appear, but instead of riding a horse symbolic of victory, He rides a humble beast of burden. What gives? Does Judas betray Jesus because Jesus isn't following the Messianic Script and getting rid of the accursed Romans?

Judea is like Poland when the Solidarity movement begins. Anna Walentynowicz, a 51-year old widow and crane operator is fired for opposing communist rule. Her shipyard erupts in protest. Lech Walesa heads a strike committee. And the entire country is like a powder keg ready to explode. That is Judea in the time of Jesus. Two rival kingdoms battling for power. With this as a backdrop, let's listen to some familiar passages:

Luke 1:46-53

Two rival kingdoms battling for power. When Mary is pregnant, she praises God, *"My soul glorifies the Lord and rejoices in God, my Savior, for he looked with favor upon the lowliness of his servant. . . But, then, things take a nasty turn as Mary continues, "He dethrones rulers, and lifts up the humble. He fills the hungry with good things, and sends the rich away empty."* Ouch, rulers don't like term-limits; no one wants to lose their power, perks, or benefits, not to mention their gerrymandered districts!

We know how the battle ends. Jesus, the friend of sinners, the healer of the sick, the encourager of the weak, the outcast, and the downtrodden, is arrested and dragged before Pilate. You can't toss moneychangers out of the temple, draw bigger crowds than the High Priest, and reinterpret the Torah without drawing a reaction.

So Pilate asks the question, the political question, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And Jesus seals His fate by replying, *"I am a king. I came into the world for this reason."* So Jesus is flogged; soldiers pummel Him and put a crown of thorns on his head. Pilate presents Him to the crowd, and the chief priests shout, *"Crucify Him! We have no king but Caesar."* And it looks like Rome wins, except for this awkward story of Jesus' tomb being empty!

All of this is the context of the closing benediction of the Lord's Prayer, *"For Thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory, forever. Amen."* Coming at the end of the prayer, the benediction returns our attention to God. So prayer begins and ends with God, not with us.

The benediction is, first, a personal declaration of allegiance. Who is Lord? – Not Caesar, but Christ. In some ways, Caesar is a benevolent ruler. You can worship your own gods, as long as you declare publically, “Caesar is my Lord and Savior,” and burn a pinch of incense in his honor. But if you don’t do that, his benevolence suddenly ends, and you’re seized and crucified.

That’s why medieval churches place statues of martyrs at their front doors. They graphically portray the cost of discipleship, which is very high today for Coptic Christians in Egypt, for victims of Boko Haram in Nigeria, for those leading house churches in China – where Christians can lose of their jobs, their livelihood or their lives.

We don’t face the issue so directly. But praying “Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever,” means that my time, my money, and my gifts and abilities no longer belong solely to me. At the bottom of his manuscripts, Johann Sebastian Bach writes the initials “S.D.G.” or *Soli Deo gloria*, “Glory to God alone.” Bach offers his musical gifts, time and efforts to God, so God will receive the glory, honor and praise.

To pray, for “Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever,” calls me to follow Jesus wherever He leads – to bring light where there is darkness, hope where there is discouragement, and peace where there is conflict. It means I’m to listen for Jesus’ call.

Early in my ministry, as I pray each morning, a man named Jim comes to my mind. I sense that I’m to phone or visit him. But logically that makes no sense. He’s in good health; he’d been in church the previous Sunday. All week I have this nagging impulse, but I put it off, even driving right by his house on Friday afternoon. I think, “I’ll stop next week.” That evening Jim dies of a heart attack. I still feel badly about that missed opportunity to minister to a dear saint, whom I greatly liked and appreciated.

But remember the Lord’s Prayer is a corporate prayer, beginning not “My Father,” but “Our Father, who art in heaven.” The Lord’s Prayer is the prayer of the church, of our family of faith. So it asks us some probing questions:

- “Our” -- Are we committed to unity, to working together for the common good?
- “Father” – Are we helping new Christians grasp the love and tender mercy of our Creator?
- “Hallowed be Thy name” – Are we who are called by the name Christian, literally “little Christ’s, honoring Jesus?”
- “Thy Kingdom Come; Thy Will be done” – Are we seeking and following the will of God daily?
- “Give us this day our daily bread” – Are we giving thanks daily for God’s provision, and feeding those who have no bread to break?

- “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” – Are we putting aside our pride to seek reconciliation with those who have hurt us?
- “Lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from evil” – Are we praying for Christ’s strength to resist temptation and harm?
- “For Thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory, forever” – Is our focus on what God wants us to be and do, or on our own vision of what the church should be and do?

Sobering questions!

But the benediction goes still further. Inevitably it thrusts us into, gasp, politics. Think again of Poland. Stalin jeered, “How many divisions does the pope have?” But when Pope John Paul II returns to Poland, he dramatically kisses the airport tarmac. Despite a state-sponsored news blackout, a million spectators line his journey into Warsaw. When he celebrates mass in Warsaw’s town square, declaring that life needs a spiritual foundation, a quarter of a million believers chant, “We want God! We want God!” John Paul’s courage helps bring down the iron curtain.

At one point, the Hallelujah Chorus resounds, “The Kingdom of this world is become the Kingdom of our Lord.” So the benediction presses us to fight for justice, to practice simplicity, to serve the poor, and to be the light of the world. In fact, this benediction challenges our very understanding of the church. Are we a provider of religious services for a consumer culture? Or are we a subversive community challenging modern values and a lifestyle built on consumerism?

The words roll off our tongues, “*For Thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory forever,*” but we can’t escape the words of the Apostle Paul, which are quoted by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book, The Cost of Discipleship, “When Christ calls us, He calls us to come and die.” To which our only response can be with the final word of the Lord’s Prayer. Let the people of God say, “Amen.”