

# Until the Kingdom Come

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## **Tenth Presbyterian Church**

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It sure is great to be at Tenth Presbyterian Church this morning and to bring you greetings from the Ryken family. Lisa and I are here this morning. We hope to bring at least the younger kids for a while in June of this year so I know some people here will be disappointed that they're not along with us, but we feel in so many ways our strong connection to Tenth Church. We listen to the webcast most Sunday mornings and we're following along well with Dr. Goligher and his sermons in Samuel and continue in various ways to reflect on and sometimes lament our departure from Philadelphia. It's great to be here in Philadelphia as our home away from home. Having said that, I do want to say how much God is blessing us in our work at Wheaton College. I have not had one day's regret about the new place of calling that God has for me and I think it's evident every day in various way the way God is blessing our ministry there.

Our children are all doing well. I'm trying to answer a couple of questions that I was asked about 500 times after the early morning service so just a little update. The children are all doing very well, thriving in their friendships and school situations. We're praying particularly for Kirsten right now who is having symptoms of juvenile arthritis. Some will recognize that Josh struggled with that for a long time and Kirsten now is very much in need of prayer for things that she is struggling with medically. But we're thrilled to be back here at Tenth Church. Very grateful to Dr. Goligher for the invitation to come this morning. I sort of invited myself over and it's spring break at the college and we've been in New York City and Washington and Philadelphia for various alumni gatherings and I just sort of hinted that we could stay for Sunday morning if there was a need.

So here I am and here we are considering this theme of "Until the Kingdom Comes." I've been thinking about the coming of the kingdom of Jesus Christ, particularly this past year. It began last spring when I was at a gathering in Denver, Colorado and I was asked whether in my opinion there is as much preaching and focus on the end times and the coming of Jesus Christ now as there perhaps had been in the evangelical church in an earlier era and I had to say, "I don't think so. I don't sense that sense of expectancy as much as at former times." And I began thinking about the possibility of focusing in my chapel sermons at Wheaton College this year on this great theme of the coming of the kingdom of Jesus Christ, kingdom come.

My desire to do that was very much confirmed by some of the billboards that I saw last spring and then into the summer, billboards sponsored by supporters of, I suppose, America's most famous false prophet. Here's what the billboard said and I saw at least one of them here in the Philadelphia area, "He is coming again," followed by a very specific date on the Gregorian calendar, "May 21, 2011. Save the date," it said. "Return of Christ, the Bible guarantees it." And down in the lower corner, the year 2012 was printed and then circled in red and crossed out to indicate that we would never even get to 2012 because Jesus would come first.

Well, as you may know, those prophecies failed to come true but it was good for the beleaguered billboard industry because there were some billboards that were printed in response. One of them first appeared in certain parts of the country on May 22, 2011. That was awkward. The billboard said, and then a relevant text from Scripture, "No one knows the day or the hour, Matthew 24:36." Then there was another group of billboards and these actually appeared, I believe, before May 21<sup>st</sup>. This was out in San Francisco, a billboard sponsored by the American Atheists and they went like this, it was an invitation to attend a post-rapture party on May 22<sup>nd</sup> and the billboard said, "2,000 years of 'any day now.' You know it's nonsense." Well, admittedly, there sometimes is more nonsense than there should be in what Christians are saying about the end of the world and the return of Jesus Christ and yet the Bible does teach us to live in hope for the coming of Christ and so we believe in kingdom come.

This is not the last and final world. The kingdom is near as Jesus promised. He is coming soon and when he does, he will make all things new and so we live in this hopeful expectation of the coming of the kingdom of Jesus Christ and when the Bible teaches on this theme as it often does in the New Testament, this theme of the coming of the kingdom, it often gives the same practical exhortation that we should proclaim that kingdom as long as we have the opportunity. The church has had this calling since the very moments when Jesus Christ, the risen Christ, ascended into heaven. We see this very clearly in Acts 1. Let me invite you to turn there in your Bibles. It's on page 909 in the church Bible and if I could just say to the sound person, I think this is just a little loud. If we could back it down just a little bit. Thank you.

Acts 1, beginning at verse 1,

1 In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, 2 until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3 He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. 4 And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." 6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" 7 He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons

that the Father has fixed by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." 9 And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, 11 and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

This is the word of God which he has promised to bless to our minds and hearts.

As we learn in these verses, after Jesus had been crucified for sinners and raised from the grave on the third day, he remained with his people for 40 days and during that time, he gave his disciples, I suppose, a kind of extended seminar in the Gospel. It is striking to me how that's described here. Basically, Jesus was teaching them the same thing he had always taught them from the very beginning of his ministry. Notice at the end of verse 3, he was speaking to them about the kingdom of God. If you remember that Jesus came striding into the world at the beginning of his public ministry as is recorded in the beginning of the Gospels, Jesus came saying that the kingdom is near. He was preaching good news and proclaiming the nearness of the kingdom and Jesus kept doing this all through his ministry. He did it in Galilee and in all the towns and villages of Israel, we are told, teaching in various synagogues and proclaiming the Gospel of the kingdom. It was specifically the "of the kingdom" Gospel. This put the good news in the context of God's sovereign rule and Jesus did this right up to the moment he was crucified. Even on the cross, he promised one of those thieves that he would come into his kingdom. The coming of the kingdom. It was central to the life and mission of Jesus Christ.

So it's not surprising then that when we come to the book of Acts and we have these last moments of his earthly ministry, as Jesus presents himself to his disciples as risen Savior and Lord, he is speaking with them about the kingdom of God. Of all the things that he could have addressed with them, this was the most important for them and for us. Now, this raised a question for the disciples. It was a question they had asked before, a question that seemed to come up almost every time Jesus talked about the coming of the kingdom, and particularly the nearness of the coming of the kingdom, and that was the question of timing. Jesus said it was near, well, how near was it? People ask the same question today.

Here's how the disciples put it, you see it in verse 6, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" Now, if you've noticed the way that Jesus answers questions in the Gospels, you know that he doesn't always answer questions directly. Sometimes he answers a question with another question or sometimes, like the master of the art of theological judo, he takes the weight of the question that you're putting to him and throws that weight in a different direction, the direction that you really ought to be going, and that's what Jesus does here. He doesn't want us to speculate about the kingdom's timing, he wants us to concentrate on proclaiming its Gospel.

So he says to his disciples, "Brothers, it's not for you to know these times or seasons. That's the Father's business. Your business is to proclaim the kingdom in the power of the Holy Spirit." And when he had given this charge, Jesus ascended into heaven in the clouds of glory, and from that moment on, the great missionary work of the church began. This command to bear witness certainly was for the original apostles. If you have been here for the evening services, you know Dr. Goligher has been preaching through the book of Acts and this theme comes up again and again, this theme of the eye witnesses of the risen Christ bearing witness to Christ in their ministry around the world. But this calling was not just for them, it is for the whole church up to the present time and so this morning, I give you what I hope is a very simple message that we are to proclaim the kingdom of Jesus Christ, that we are to proclaim it everywhere, and that we are to proclaim it until Jesus comes again.

So, first: proclaim the kingdom. Proclaim the kingdom. This, perhaps, is not always the verb that we use when we talk about the kingdom of God. I sometimes speak this way myself. We certainly hear other Christians speaking about building the kingdom, advancing the kingdom of God, working for the kingdom, but the verb the Bible typically, I believe most frequently uses, is "proclaim the kingdom." The kingdom is something that God brings, what we do with that kingdom is proclaim it. It's not a work we perform, it's a message we proclaim.

The kingdom mainly comes by the preaching of the Gospel. You see this very clearly in the book of Acts. The apostles preaching the kingdom. Jesus had called them to be witnesses and we look at the sermons of Stephen and Peter and Philip and Paul and they are always proclaiming the good news and it is sometimes referred to as preaching the kingdom. Paul speaks this way when he goes to Ephesus. The Bible describes his ministry, it says he was persuading people about the kingdom of God. Paul referred to his own ministry that way. He described it as one of proclaiming the kingdom and that is simply to announce, not simply through God honoring actions, but more specifically through Gospel communicating words, to announce that Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord; that he is the Creator God who lived for us and died for us and rose again for us and has now ascended into heaven with the power of eternal life. It's to proclaim that this Jesus is now sovereign ruler over everything in heaven and earth. The whole universe is under his authority and it is to invite people to come into that blessed kingdom by surrendering to his gracious rule.

I love the way the Lausanne Covenant produced at the great Lausanne Congress in 1974 defined evangelism, "To evangelize is to spread the good news that Jesus died for our sins and was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures." That's just coming right out of 1 Corinthians 15. And the covenant goes on to say this, "Evangelism is the proclamation of the historical biblical Christ as Savior and Lord with a view to persuading people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God."

Each of us has a part to play in proclaiming this Gospel. The Holy Spirit does not outsource evangelism. That's the calling of the church, the followers of Christ, all of us have a part to play in sharing the Gospel and yet some of us, maybe many of us frankly,

have excuses we use for not sharing the Gospel. "I really don't have any opportunities. I'm not gifted in evangelism the way that other person is gifted." These are the ways that we sometimes think but maybe the real problem is we don't trust the Holy Spirit to do what the Holy Spirit has promised to do and use God's word even if it's explained very simply or sometimes ineffectively, use that word to bring people to faith in Christ. Not so much because of our efforts but often in spite of them.

We should be careful therefore not to make proclaiming the kingdom more complicated than it really is. Sometimes it's as simple as inviting somebody to a Gospel preaching church. One of the admissions counselors at Wheaton College, my friend, Becky Wilson, gave testimony to this earlier this year how God had used her witness in a very simple way. She works in the admissions department at the college but formerly served overseas in missionary work and has a heart particularly for Asian people in the United States. She saw a woman who turned out to be Chinese at a local playground and she was looking after her daughter and Becky went over and began a conversation. It led to a friendship and Becky invited this woman to do something that as an atheist she had never done before and that was to study the Bible. It started at a backyard Bible club and the children would receive a Bible lesson and then Becky would explain it to her friend afterward so that she understood the lesson. She invited her to an early morning Bible study with other women and then eventually she confided that she really wasn't a morning person and wondered if there was some kind of evening Bible study she could go to.

So she began studying the Bible with some other women and what Becky will never forget is the way that that friend, just the radiant joy on her face as she came up to her in the parking lot after school one day bearing testimony that she had given her life to Christ the night before. It had happened as she was studying the Bible and she came to the place where Jesus commands us to love our enemies and she realized she could never do that, only God could do something like that or empower something like that. She went home that night and asked her husband, also an atheist, for permission to become a Christian and he said yes partly because he had already seen the way her life was changing through her encounter with the Bible and with Christian people.

She stayed up all night reading the Bible. Read the Bible all through the next day until it was time to pick up her daughter at school and here's how she described what had happened to Becky. She said, "It's like I have new eyes. It's like everything is in color now when it was colorless before." Don't you want to have the joy, the unbelievable joy of helping somebody see the world in Gospel color? Don't you want to have that joy for yourself? If you've never seen the world the way God is calling you to see it through Jesus Christ, don't you want to do whatever you can to use your witness so that God can do that work in somebody else's life? I wonder, are you involved in at least one ministry that proclaims the Gospel? Are you praying for one person specifically to come to faith in Christ? Are you ready for one opportunity? The next opportunity you may have to bear witness to Christ in a personal friendship? When the time is right, your words will be a witness and the Holy Spirit will use them to do his saving work.

I can think of another story recently shared with me by my friend, David Horner, who teaches apologetics at Biola University. David has recently written a great book for college students and for students preparing to go off to college called "Mind Your Faith." It's particularly for students in the secular context; how to grow in their discipleship in their college years. But in that book, he describes a conversation he had when he was a university student, a freshman who was on the debate team came up to him and said, "Are you Dave Horner? I hear you're a Christian." When Horner admitted that he was, this debater proceeded to ask a challenging question, "What's a Christian?" Well, David was anticipating an argument so he tried to come up with an air-tight definition of Christianity that used a lot of theological terminology that would be hard to argue with and yet as the conversation continued, he had a sense he wasn't really taking the right approach and he said, "Wait a minute, are you asking me what a Christian is because you want to become one?" The young man said, "Yes, that's exactly why I'm asking." David said, "Okay, we need to have a different kind of conversation here." They went outside and they had a long conversation and that student gave his life to Christ right then and there in that conversation. When the time is right, the Holy Spirit can use you even if you're going the completely wrong direction in the conversation to bring someone to faith in Christ, to come into the kingdom of God. Will you be ready for that time when the time comes?

Well, this calling, proclaim the Gospel, is something we carry with us wherever we go. Jesus told his apostles to be his witnesses. He told them to start right where they were, right there in Jerusalem, but he also sent them out: Judea, Samaria, the ends of the earth. We get a sense of that in the book of Acts. We see the Gospel spreading from one place to another place and this is our calling as well: proclaim the kingdom, don't just proclaim the kingdom but proclaim the kingdom everywhere. The Gospel is intended in the plan and strategy of God to go from every place to every place.

Now, from the perspective of Acts 1, we are living at the ends of the earth; we're not in Jerusalem or Judea or Samaria, but there is a kind of pattern here for Gospel witness. Many Christians have recognized this. There is a sense in which wherever we are, that place is our Jerusalem. If you think about it, no one else in the world is in a better place to reach the people in your network of relationships than you are. You are the person that God has sent to that place.

Our proclamation of the Gospel does not stop there, it goes everywhere. We have this wider concern for the work of the Gospel around the world and a calling to do our part in supporting that work. I love the way Charles Spurgeon described this and this is something I've quoted for this congregation before, some of you will have heard it. Charles Spurgeon was talking about the great work of the spreading of the kingdom of God and he was speaking about this from his perspective preaching in London and he said, "The Christian church was designed from the first to be aggressive. It was not intended to remain stationary at any period but to advance onward until its boundaries become commensurate with those of the world. It was not intended to radiate from one point only but to form numerous centers from which its influence might spread to all surrounding parts."

I certainly see this happening in Wheaton, Illinois. I have a chance through my involvement with the Chicago Metro Presbytery, the PCA, to get a sense of the church planting work going on in Chicago. There is a Spanish speaking church of some 300 members recently planted meeting on the campus of Wheaton College, doing great Gospel work, and there are other churches around the city of Chicago. It's part of the calling of Wheaton College over the 150 years now to send out missionaries to all parts of the world and it's certainly the calling of this congregation. If you read your bulletin, I think it was last week if I picked up the right one, you saw an account, first person account from someone who is doing our Gospel work with his pickup truck from village to village in his country. I looked out in the earlier service and saw Howard Blair sitting in the pews here and thought of Howard and Phoebe and their work in Japan, how they planted a church that became a missionary sending church. We had an encouraging report from Bruce McDowell and the rest of the Liberia team; maybe 28 people who gave their lives to Christ through that evangelistic witness. We have many other missionaries who are doing their work one convert at a time, one disciple at a time. It was exciting for me to hear John C. has been in Wheaton at the Wheaton Eye Clinic just a week or two ago to talk about his work in Africa and encourage those who have a heart for missions at that clinic.

There are all kinds of opportunities that we have and what a privilege it is through Tenth Presbyterian Church to support that kind of Gospel work around the world, but then we still have to ask ourselves: what is my part? What is my part specifically in proclaiming the Gospel? Where will I do this Gospel work? You might think of evangelism as the original form of viral marketing. One person has an experience that they share with one other person and then that person having the experience, shares it with one other person. It can happen in our own homes as we as parents share the Gospel with their children, where brothers and sisters share the Gospel with one another. It can happen in our neighborhoods from house to house and our places of work. It's really happening all over the world. This is God's strategy for the evangelization of the world. It is contagious Christians who carry the Gospel wherever they go and may I say, that strategy will never work if all we come up with is a mild case of Christianity. It needs to be a full-blown devotion to Jesus Christ that then has its contagious influence in the lives of others. It's at that point that God uses our words of Gospel truth confirmed by deeds of Christ-like love to bring people into his kingdom.

I love the way that Jonathan Edwards thought about his ministry. He said he had two propositions that were at the heart of what he wanted to communicate: first, that every person ought to give his life to Christ. Jonathan Edwards wanted to communicate that in every way that he could. That's what we want to communicate to you this morning if you don't have a relationship with Christ. Every person ought to have a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Edwards went on to give this second proposition: whether or not that person does give his life to Christ, I will give my life to that person. It's a good way of thinking about evangelism that call for people to come to Christ but until that happens that you will give

your life to those around you so that God can use your witness, your witness in their lives.

And we are called to keep doing this until the end of the world. That's the last thing I want to say this morning. We proclaim the Gospel of the kingdom; we proclaim it everywhere; and we keep on proclaiming it until Jesus comes again. We get a hint of that, I think, here in Acts 1. Jesus ascends to his Father, the disciples are standing there looking up into heaven and the angel comes and tells them to stop doing that because, instead, they are supposed to go out and do what Jesus told them to do which was to proclaim the Gospel of the kingdom. Notice from verse 11, they are to do this in light of the fact that a day is coming when Jesus will come again just the way that he left, on the clouds of glory. I believe the clear implication of the language the angel uses here is that until that happens, until Jesus does come again, they are to be busy and we are to be busy proclaiming the kingdom. Nearly every time the New Testament talks about the coming of the kingdom of God, maybe that's an exaggeration, often, I'll say, when the New Testament talks about the coming of the kingdom of God, it makes this same practical application that we are to be busy proclaiming the Gospel.

We see it clearly at the end of Matthew. Jesus talks about the signs of the ends of the age. He says to his disciples, "this gospel of the kingdom," there is that language again, "will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." Jesus is putting evangelism into what a theologian would call its eschatological perspective; he's connecting evangelism to the end times, our proclaiming of the kingdom to his coming with the kingdom and that end is closer than ever before.

Jesus didn't say exactly what would count as proclaiming the Gospel to a nation. It's hard to know exactly when that work has really been done. Jesus doesn't explicitly say that the end will come immediately after the last person on earth that needs to hear the Gospel does hear the Gospel, but there seems to be a connection there and we're living at a time that's very exciting in world history because missionaries are planting, actively planting and strategizing, to go to the last unreached people groups in the world and to translate the Bible into the last known languages. You hear different estimates, but some missionary leaders believe we are only 10 or 20 years away from fulfilling the Great Commission, at least in this sense, that the Gospel will have been proclaimed to every people group and words of the Gospel will be available in every language.

This was the focus of discussion at the Lausanne gathering for evangelism to North America last spring. There was a worldwide gathering in 2010 in Cape Town; as you know, Tenth was involved in that in various ways. And then a gathering for North American evangelism last spring and a number of leaders from the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College came back to describe that event and the sense of excitement that some people had that we're living at this particular time in history. One comparison was made at that congress, it was pointed out that Christians often anticipate the joy that they will have in heaven and having a chance personally to meet with some of the great heroes of the Bible. Imagine the long lines of people wanting to speak to the Apostle Paul or the things that you've always wanted to ask Peter about his relationship to Jesus. But one of



the speakers there was saying imagine how excited they will be to speak to the people that were alive at the time when the work that they only just began was finally completed. They will have that same sense of anticipation. "What was it like to be living in the world at that moment when the work that we began in the first century was finally completed and the whole earth had the opportunity to hear the Gospel?"

We don't know when that time will come, but surely we want to do our own part in that ongoing work of the church in proclaiming the Gospel. Maybe your part will only be a small part, but if it's really kingdom work, there is no kingdom work that is so small that it shouldn't be done as well as you can do it. Don't be overwhelmed by the world's needs and all of the Gospel work that needs to be done. Don't be discouraged by that. Don't feel guilty for all the things that you're not doing. Praise God for what other believers are able to do and focus in on having the courage and faithfulness to do the one thing that God has called you to do whatever that is. Tell him this morning that your life is still open to his plan and direction for you and pray for the faithfulness to keep doing whatever that work is until the very end.

That's what Paul did. It's a wonderful way the book of Acts ends. It begins with this great call to go out and witness for the Gospel. You get to the end of the book of Acts and it says that Paul, even though he's under house arrest, is still proclaiming the kingdom of God with all boldness and without hindrance. Well, that's a great thing to do. That's part of my prayer for myself, that I'll be able to do that to the end of my days. I hope it's your prayer for you.

George Whitefield learned about this calling at a critical and discouraging time in his ministry. George Whitefield, the great English evangelist who came to North America; had a very influential ministry right here in Philadelphia. You can read all about it from Benjamin Franklin. But there came a time when George Whitefield was desperately ill, feeling, it seems, a little sorry for himself as we sometimes feel when we're sick and in his case, fearing the worst, he thought he was probably dying. But the African American woman who was his nursemaid would have none of it. She said, "No, Master Whitefield, you are not to die yet. There are thousands of souls to bring to Christ, so keep your spirits up for you must live and not die." That was pretty good nursing, I think, telling your patient not to die yet, but it was good theology, maybe even better theology and Christian practice. And Whitefield did rise from that bed. He brought many thousands to faith in Christ after that, right up to the end of his earthly days.

As long as there is life in us, we should proclaim the kingdom everywhere we can until Jesus comes.

*Our Father, we pray for the courage and faithfulness and gifting to do that as well as you will enable us to do it by the power of your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.*