

The Invincible Kingdom of God¹

We end our sermons on the "Hereafter" today, and I'd like to look at how it all works together.

Last week, we talked about our personal destiny after life. It turns out that Jesus' resurrection provides the master key to understanding our own destiny after death. We too will be raised bodily and will reign with our Lord.

But here's an interesting little fact. When the first disciples realized that Jesus was raised from the grave, they didn't immediately think, "Oh goody! This means eternal life for us!" That belief came along but it wasn't the first thing that went through their minds.

The first meaning of the resurrection for the original followers was that God's restoration of the world was under way. The fleeting thought went through my mind that if I was one of the original disciples and I was realizing that Jesus had been raised up, my feeling would be, "Wow, this is huge, and now that he's back, I wish I'd paid better attention to all the stuff he has taught us before he died." Because it's clearly true now. The kingdom Jesus talked so much about indeed is dawning. Everything has changed.

One of the powerful lessons for me over the last month or so is that God's ultimate restoration will be happening in this

¹ Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on July 19, 2009 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA.

world rather than in a vague other place like heaven. When we sing the old hymn, "This world is not my home; I'm just a-passing through. My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue," we can think of it as a good example of a misleading worship song that discounts this world and our lives in it and God's intention to fill this world and her peoples with his presence.

So, where does all of this leave you and me? How are we supposed to live? Well, it helps to think of ourselves as living in the middle of things. We look back to the resurrection of Jesus and we realize that a huge first step has been taken in God's restoration of all things and people. And we look to the future and think that God is going to do for us—this old world—what he did for Jesus, namely, he's going to raise her up.

Our task is to contribute what we can to the building of that world. Someone says, "But God is building the kingdom, we're arrogant if we think that our puny efforts will get the job done." Well, you are correct that only God will finally bring to fulfillment his kingdom. But he calls and equips you and me to contribute to his work.

Think of our sanctuary building renovation. We know that someday the entire exterior will be repaired. We have a good

idea what those repairs will consist of. We see the basic picture of what being finished with that project will look like. And...we can't do it all right now. I remember the discussion with the committee that planned this current work. If we can't afford the entire project, can we do something that will be a part of the final solution? In other words, we didn't want to patch the mortar and then undo that work to redo it properly. We wanted to advance toward the goal of the correct solution.

That's a simple illustration of what Christian mission consists of. You and I are here to make a contribution towards the ultimate kingdom that God is bringing into this world.

What does this mean in plain thought? It means that we work to make the world fair for everyone. The world which God is bringing to being isn't going to have skeletal think refuges who can't even get a drink of clean water while powerful financiers divvy up public and investor money into jackpot annual bonuses. Because the kingdom of God will afford all persons a place and sufficiency for their needs, you and I implement a little of that ultimate justice as best we can today. Even the smallest act of justice like giving a pack of crackers to a hungry person will be a small piece of that kingdom of Justice coming into the world.

The same is true of our efforts towards beautification. If we envision the kind of world that God intends to establish, it certainly isn't going to consist of belching smokestacks and empty K-Mart stores.

Our efforts to build beautiful things—homes, cities, and goods are part of the building of the Kingdom.

When Jenny and I went to Malawi, we stopped in to visit a Catholic mission which consisted of a church and several buildings including a museum. All these projects were nestled in the trees and landscape and were very attractive. I think the priest who oversaw that mission project was really on to the Spirit of Christian mission that I'm trying to lift up.

Finally, in the resurrected world that God will one day establish, Jesus will be the center and leader. In other words, the freedom, wisdom, and life we get from him will be acknowledged by everyone—all peoples.

Accordingly, any time you or I tell someone about Jesus, that effort will live eternally and will fit in somehow in the ultimate kingdom.

You're riding in the car talking warmly with a good friend. You kind of throw your shyness to the wind and say, "Talking and learning from Jesus day in and day out, is really

the only steeple of living that makes sense. Being a disciple is everything to me."

That simple act of simply acknowledging your own truth is a contribution to the building the kingdom of God which only God himself can fully establish.

Working for more fairness, more beauty, and more knowledge of Jesus are three ways our mission takes shape. The reassuring thing is that these tasks are precisely what God seems to be getting us ready to do. Through worship and spiritual gifts and what we learn in our Christian education. God makes mission-shaped people. And that's us.

It all began with Jesus walked out of that tomb. Not only was the kingdom of God near. It was appearing. And you and I are a part of it.