

First Vespers of Advent

Bulletin

Audio

'There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.'

+INJ+

The greatest of those born of woman, St. John the Baptist, calls forth, *'the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Repent, and believe the Gospel.'*

And indeed, the Kingdom of Heaven is indeed about us. In a most real way, we dwell in it here, in this humble sanctuary. Every day we enjoy this garden established for us by the Lord in His great mercy, by His great sacrifice; a second Eden, unequalled by the first. A true paradise, though we may not always see it so.

We eat of its table, bath in its rivers, hear the song of its birds and winds, and enjoy the sacred conversations of its residents, and the divine teachings of its gardener, who in all things sustains this *land of milk and honey* with *every word that flows from the mouth of God*.

For what is the kingdom of heaven, but the rule of God over all things?

Luther puts this most simply: the kingdom is nothing but that place and instance where the will of God is done, and done among us also. It is where the rule and evil counsel and will of the devil is broken, where the flesh and the unbelieving world have no voice, and where His Word keeps and sustains us until our blessed death.

It is, to put it simply, the Church, holy, catholic, born of the labor of the Apostles

and preserved by the almighty will of the Lord. It is the Church, witnessed in all its earthly glory, graven in stone and gold and a thousand years of the suffering of the saints. It is Christians, two or three gathered, meeting humbly in houses made with human hands, affordable until needing repairs, decorated by the love of widows but not adorned by the wealth of philanthropists, carrying out the toils-in-secret of its master, Jesus Christ; like a fisherman in the morning fog, in silence, laying down his line, that he might draw forth from the water a new fish, that the body might be fed.

It is a dirty cloth laid over the hood of an even dirtier Jeep a mile from the fields of killing, that brave men might find their bravery in the blood of Him who sweated blood before His death, and that men needing comforting might find comfort in the Words of Him who comforted the thief upon his executioner's see.

It is that Church, holding the hand of a wretched, emaciated body hiding an even more wretched and infirm mind, bound to so many tubes and machines in the ammonia-drenched halls of tile, with eyes blinking away from the world that was, that they might open to the world that is to come, as the prayers and hymns of childhood are murmured in melancholic piety.

It is this Church that consecrates the dust thrown over the casket, as the believer follows His Lord into the earth, that he too might be raised with Him on the Last Day.

It is this house that, daily assaulted by the world as backward, superstitious, a refuge for infirm women, yet professes the old and faded yet ever-living truth of the promises of the Ancient of Days, *in season and out*.

It is this house that infected with heresies and compromises to gain the love of interesting intellectuals in their universities or fashionable fashionistas in their chateaus, yet calls like a voice in the wilderness, or a wind in the desert, that one must *give up all that one has to the poor, and follow*.

It is this house that ever dying, never dies; that ever hated, yet loves; that ever cursed, blesses. It is the house of the Lord, the Church of God, the rule of His Kingdom, which has no end.

Even now the Master of this Kingdom sustains His most beloved possession daily, calling to tend His garden *the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists,*

the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

Grow not sick and tired, disenchanted or disappointed in the weak and tottering thing we call 'the church' and 'Christianity.' For though sinful, fallen, men make it frail, the unfailing God stands beside it, ever strengthening it against all adversity; as He has in ages past when He brought our ancestors out of Egypt, and as He will forevermore, until the dragon be slain, and the Whore of Babylon cast down.

Therefore, dear Christian, look upon these dated walls, this fraying carpet, this organ that, though beautiful in sound, is still electric. Cast your eyes upon them, and sing praise to the Lord Most High, sing:

*'Walk about Zion, go around her,
number her towers,
consider well her ramparts,
go through her citadels,
that you may tell the next generation
that this is God,
our God forever and ever.
He will guide us forever.'*

+INJ+

Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Psalm 48; Deuteronomy 6:4-15; Ephesians 4:1-17.