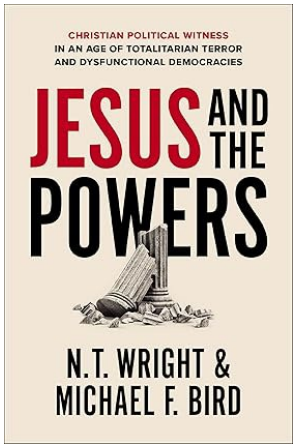
SERMON NOTES — November 24, 2024
Reign of Christ Sunday

Happy New Year! Today is like "New Year's Eve" in the lectionary, ending Year B, the year we feature Mark's Gospel. Next Sunday, the First Sunday of Advent, we begin Year C, the year of featuring Luke's Gospel. It's also been a year that Pastor Paul has been here. Let's recap.

<u>The Urgency of Revitalizing the Gospel Message</u>

1. The promise of life after death remains vital, but as part of a much larger promise to renew all of creation — New Creation — in which the effects of human sin are defeated and God's power of life is all-in-all.
2. The project of New Creation begins with the launching of God's reign on earth through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. In Mark's Gospel we see this reign through his healing and his crossing of human boundaries of division.
3. Human reigns are characterized by scapegoating divisiveness, where the effects of mimetic conflict are contained by the use of political violence where the rulers rule over the others with oppressive powers that we can name as "nationalism" — a constant state of war between communities of people. The ultimate faith of human reigns is in the power of violence to try to contain violence.
4. Jesus launches God's reign by going to the cross and suffering the typical human violence of human reigns, in a pivotal act of nonviolent engagement of the powers of violence. The ultimate faith of God's reign is in the power of love to bring life and peace — the first fruits of which we see in the resurrection on Easter.

Today's Gospel Reading, as Jesus stands condemned by Pilate, clearly shows us the difference between human reigns and God's reign: "If my kingdom were from this world, my supporters would have fought to stop me being handed over to the Judeans." We used the translation of pre-eminent New Testament scholar N.T. Wright who says about this passage:



> This translation captures something that many commentators gloss over. Yes, Jesus' kingdom is not like the kingdoms of this world. It doesn't originate the same way or behave like the kingdoms of this world. But Jesus' kingdom is still for this world, for the benefit and blessing of this world, for the redemption and rescue of this world. If Jesus were an earthly king of this age, then there would be soldiers killing to bring about his kingdom, just as they do for every other earthly kingdom: victory through violence. Yet that's not how Jesus' kingdom will come. The kingdom will come rather through the imperial violence done to him on the cross and through the anti-imperial, death-reversing, justice-loving power of resurrection. Then the kingdom spreads, not through conquest, but through the spirit's life-giving and liberating power being experienced by more and more people and through their life-giving contributions to the world. At the heart of John's kingdom-theology is God's love revealed in the death of his Son, the Lamb, the Messiah. This is conquest, but by love. This is power, but in weakness. This is kingship, but in self-giving suffering for others. This kingdom is not one that arises from within the world. But as it advances, as it spreads, it dispels and displaces the dark forces in the world.
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> If Jesus' kingdom is of such an order, not from this world but for this world, then keeping out of politics is impossible. We must be political in some sense because the kingdom of God has political implications for proclamation and poverty, for justice and judgement, for Congress and Church, for love and liberty. While Church and State are separable, there is always going to be a connection between religion and politics because of the intersection of values and voting. Religion is going to be part of the political conversation whether everyone likes it or not. (*Jesus and the Powers*, 35-36)

Catholic peace activist and author John Dear says of this passage:

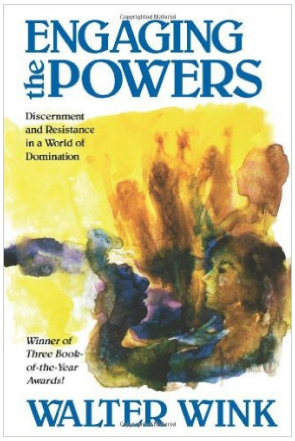
> The only difference between the kingdoms of this world, from Rome to America, is that this world of empire uses violence and war; Jesus's kingdom of peace and love is totally nonviolent, non-dominating, non-coercive. No one is violent in that kingdom, beginning with King Jesus. (*The Gospel of Peace*, 352)

The first three centuries of Christian witness and life centered around nonviolent engagement of the Powers in the Roman Empire. The Greek word for "witness," *martyr*, named the Christian witness. When the Church allied itself with Empire in the Fourth Century, becoming "Christendom," that nonviolent engagement with the nationalistic powers of violence was no longer associated with the Gospel. It wasn't until a Hindu man, Mahatma Gandhi, began to practice Jesus' nonviolent engagement, ironically against the Christendom power of the British Empire, that nonviolence has once again begun to takes it place at the center of the Christian Gospel.

In Mark's Gospel, the epitome of nonviolent engagement is the cross itself. But I believe we can also see it acts like the on in the last scene just before the Passion Narrative begins: the story of the "Widow's Might" that we read two weeks ago (Mark 12:38-44). We read her giving of her last 'penny' as a protest against the greed of the wealthy who had, according to Jesus, "devoured her house." She shamed them with her 'generosity.'

While the cross is the epitome of nonviolent engagement, it's important to know that there are many steps that can be taken before making the decision to offer up one's very life, like Jesus. The other most important passage of examples is the one which Gandhi himself keyed upon, from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:

> Jesus continued, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. (Matt 5:38-41)



Let me tell you the story of meeting Walter Wink in 1994 and 1995, who pioneered the theme of nonviolent engagement of the powers on violence as the heart of the Christian Gospel in his 1992 book *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*. I met him at my first-ever Girardian meeting in Chicago in November 1994. Then I met him again the very next year, as he gave a presentation on his book right here in Racine at the Siena Center. Since I had met him a few months earlier, he enlisted me in acting out the nonviolence protests of Matthew 5:38-41 — which I will act out for you this morning. [Acted out with help from the congregation.] Do you see how these are similar to the story of the Widow's Might? Shaming the powers that seek to dominate you?

Let's end with a quote from the person who took Gandhi's movement and brought it to our politics here in the United States, Martin Luther King, Jr., from his Christmas sermon of 1967:

> Love is understanding, creative, redemptive good will toward all men. . . . We must never let up in our determination to remove every vestige of segregation and discrimination from our nation, but we shall not in the process relinquish our privilege to love.
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> I've seen too much hate to want to hate, myself, and I've seen hate on the faces of too many sheriffs, too many white citizens' councilors, and too many Klansmen of the South to want to hate, myself; and every time I see it, I say to myself, hate is too great a burden to bear. Somehow we must be able to stand up before our most bitter opponents and say: "We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we will still love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws and abide by the unjust system, because noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good, and so throw us in jail and we will still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and, as difficult as it is, we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and drag us out on some wayside road and leave us half-dead as you beat us, and we will still love you. . . . But be assured that we'll wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day we will win our freedom. We will not only win freedom for ourselves; we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory." (*A Testament of Hope*, 256-57)

Are we about to see a rise of nationalistic violence in this New Year ahead? Let us begin in prayer and a relearning of the Gospel for living into the promise of God's reign in Jesus Christ — that Love Wins!