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## *The Thousand Year Plan*

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa**  
**The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 12, Year A**

Jesus talked a lot about the kingdom of God, or kingdom of heaven, as Matthew calls it. “The kingdom of heaven has come near. Pray for God’s kingdom come, on earth as in heaven. Seek ye first the kingdom of God; strive for the kingdom of heaven.”

And we want to, we really do! If *only* we knew what he meant. If *only* we knew what the kingdom of heaven really is. Jesus says it’s like a mustard seed, yeast, a treasure, a merchant, and a fishnet. But that doesn’t exactly clear things up! Where we are we supposed to find it? On earth or in heaven? In this life or after it? Is it something we pray for and wait for, or something we strive and work for?

We in the “work-for-it” camp *do* try, don’t we? The problem is that we don’t all agree about what we need to be doing or how to do it. The problem is that some days, despite all our striving, the kingdom still seems impossibly far away.

So, we either work even harder, as if it all depended on us. Or we give up, tired, weary, defeated. Convinced that nothing we do will ever make real, lasting difference. Convinced that the kingdom of God, though a lovely idea, is not something we’ll ever see in our time.

But our time is not the only time. And how we see time and history has a lot to do with how we see the kingdom of God, and minister, and care and keep caring. How we keep doing the good we can, through hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword. It has a lot to do with how we keep hoping and loving, in life or death, or things present or things to come, or anything else in all creation that might seem like it will be our undoing, the great divide, the bitter end.

This is something I learned in prison, of all places, where you think a lot about time. Fresh out of seminary, I was the new director of a theology program there, co-founded by my professor, Dr. Liz Bounds, and long-time prison chaplain, Susan Bishop. I hit the ground running! I was ready to bestow my newfound knowledge, fix the world, right its wrongs, and usher in the Kingdom of God through my ministry and this program.

Chaplain Bishop was *not* a new seminary graduate. She had been doing on-the-ground prison chaplaincy for over thirty years. And she was my supervisor at the prison. Which I did not appreciate much at first, because she didn’t seem to share my sense of urgency; and I thought I understood more than she did; and she called me on the carpet when I—or a student-teacher I supervised—jeopardized the program by being careless with the rules we found so incomprehensible.

She was often late, too, and never seemed to hurry, which was also incomprehensible to me, as I rushed about and prized being on time (which may be a surprise to those of you who know me now!). It was incomprehensible, that is, until I walked across the compound with her: she couldn’t go twenty feet without someone wanting to talk to her. She could tell what was and wasn’t important at the time; and when it was important, she stopped and ministered, right there on the sweltering hot sidewalk, no matter how long it took or who was waiting.

You see, Chap had a different understanding of time, and that affected how she approached ministry. I don’t know when I first heard her mention “the thousand year plan.” It was probably when I was pestering her about moving the theology library, a project that was taking way too long, even though it was, in my view, the most pressing matter for the entire prison and the kingdom of God. I’ve forgotten her exact words, but the gist was

something like: *I'm on the thousand-year plan. And you might want to be too, if you want to get anything significant or sustainable done, and not lose hope along the way.*

Over the years, I saw how that thousand-year plan liberated her to do what she could: to tend to people and relationships. To invest in what really mattered in the moment. To be present, fully present, when someone lost a loved one, or yet another appeal—or was denied parole or clemency; and her heart was breaking with theirs. It empowered her to persist through delays and setbacks and disappointments, trusting that they were not the end, but rather belonged to the slow process of changing hearts and minds, and bringing others along with her.

That “thousand years” *is* a quantity of time, of course. A big one! But it is also a statement of faith: time is overseen, inhabited, and inspired by God, who is working in all things for good. In this long view of history, we are not separated from the good work or people who have come before or will come after us, but rather connected, across time and eternity. Because God is the ground of all being and all time.

So, how do we keep going and caring and seeking the kingdom of heaven when it seems so far away? How do we transcend and transform the kingdoms of earth, while living wholeheartedly in them? How do we cope with the awareness that life as we know it today, what seems so urgent today, will be a memory tomorrow?

We remember that all our efforts, all our times, all our lives are in God's hands and God's time. We develop “the art of living in multiple spheres of time and space”<sup>[1]</sup>: we live in the present and the past and the future, in the kingdom of heaven that is here on earth and still on its way. And we embrace the paradoxes we find there. Time is fleeting and eternal. Time moves forward and backward and around in circles, and it stands still. We are mortal, and we have been given everlasting life.

We grow comfortable with these paradoxes and seek the greater whole, trusting in the eternal One who holds them all, and us all, together.

This faith in God's time, in God's purposes being worked out in history, sustains us not only in ministry, but also in the changes and chances of this life—and in the losses and regrets and big existential questions that come with them.

In the passages of time and of life, nothing and no one is forgotten or lost in God's time. We do not have to imbue time with significance. We don't have to create meaning for our lives. It is there already.

Therefore, we live and strive and minister and love and care for another reason: it is a gift. Ministry is a gift. Life is a gift. Seeking the kingdom of God is a gift. The relationships we build along the way are a gift. This is the kingdom itself, and participation in the Christ who loves us, ever and always. And who meets us, and waits for us, in the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>[1]</sup> John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 148.