

## “Ruler of the Hidden”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, Pastor, Church of the Covenant (Lynchburg, VA) 1/31/21

*Isaiah 57:15, Mark 4:11*

Clues. That’s often what we are left with when trying to understand God, isn’t it? Glimpses, really. That’s, more times than not, all that we really have to go on. We have phrases from Jesus, like “The first shall be last and the last shall be first” when referring to God’s reign, even on earth. We have the scripture from the ancient prophet Isaiah (57:15) which tells us that God lives above us or outside of us in some way, choosing to reside with the humble (uh huh, “the least of these” perhaps – Matthew 20:16). This has been a longstanding belief of Bev Cosby’s, our spiritual father, that God is most pronounced among the most marginalized and suffering based on Jesus’ own teaching that “whatever you do for these who are considered lowest in society, you actually do for me (Matthew 25:40).” I am telling you nothing new, but simply confirming a truth that many of us here already espouse wholeheartedly.

Bev went as far as to question our idolatrous fixation on sacred spaces and grandiose sanctuaries as strange paradoxes for a people who know God resides with the suffering. He said, “if you want to be where Jesus is, be with the poor.” Virgil Wood, friend of Dr. King and a great Civil Rights leader in Lynchburg in the early 60’s during his address to the University of Lynchburg community this past Tuesday gave a very stern assessment of his late friend. “If you knew Martin then you’d understand all he wanted was to help the poor, to die for the poor.” Marginalization takes many forms and uses many tools to enact its vitriolic mission of hate, but its result is always the same: Poverty, destitution, suffering, and death. Jesus lived and ministered among the poor. Martin Luther King Jr. lived and worked to help the poor. It is impossible to ignore that the saints we hold so dear like St. Nicholas or St. Francis of Assisi or even Mother Teresa; they were people dedicated to the poor. There is little doubt that they caught on to this theological understanding: *God is with the poor*. Even Jesus shook his head and commented on how difficult it is for a rich person to understand let alone enter God’s kingdom (Matthew 10:25). I don’t think this means the rich are condemned to hell or anything like that, I’m just saying that to really enter God’s kingdom on earth (that place of love and refuge for Creation itself, or better yet God’s thick presence), the rich will struggle but the poor will struggle less because according to this theology: *They are already there*. Jesus even said to the poor (Mark 4:11), “To you has been given the mysteries of the kingdom of God.” In Hebrew the word mystery or “the hidden” is wrapped into the word “*olam*.” It is more than just a word, though, it is a pre-Roman concept that is rarely studied these days, but Jesus alludes to it here—even in his teachings to his followers who are in large part, representative of the poor of Judea. There are mysteries yet to be revealed. There is much we still don’t know.

The Hebrew word “*olam*” is well known and common to almost every Jewish prayer—as it is featured in the phrase that begins most prayers: *Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha-olam*. Translated: *Blessed are you Lord, our God, Ruler of the (the hidden/ the mystery)*. In later millennia the word “*olam*” began to shift from time-oriented (eternity/infinity) and esoteric (hidden/mystery) to the physical space

(planet, universe). But we know that Jesus was referring to the former, the “hidden eternal.” The word “olam” is used more than 430 times in Scripture, and each time it refers to the former as well. Here, Jesus was bringing new understanding of things that had remained hidden to creation, and interestingly it is again those who the prophet Isaiah refers to as residing with God, “the humble,” the poor, those that are now in the know. They are let in on the secrets of the universe. They are brought into the kingdom of God, or better yet, they ARE the kingdom itself because Jesus told them, and spiritually told us, “the Kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21).

“Olam” –that which is hidden—is revealed in you. Malekh ha’olam, Ruler of the Hidden, is in the business of revealing these mysteries to us, piece by piece. There are some that believe these mysteries are hidden in the Scriptures themselves, others who believe they are hidden in a combination of sacred texts and teachings, and then others who believe it will be revealed in prayer, meditation, and other forms of contemplative practice: i.e. in the silence, the mystery reveals itself. Then there are those of us who do not discount any of these, honoring them all as valuable wells to draw from, but then others of us have yet found a more tangible answer to the question of “hidden.” We believe God’s presence resides in earnest with the poor. To be physically, mentally, emotionally with the poor is to be in many ways with God. For us this offers a true transcendence from this world into the next, from this dimension of self-living to the dimension of selfless-living. A spring forward from inward journey to outward journey and then forward again to inward journey, and then forward again to outward. It is in this way, recursive in nature, but somehow propels us forward along the path, adding layers of increasing knowledge and experience, new dimensions of spirituality and internal/external peace.

So, maybe Malekh ha’olam, Ruler of the Hidden, is really referring to the Ruler of the humble, the contrite, the repentant, --in other words, the poor, the marginalized, the suffering. If God is most endeared by those who suffer the most and chooses to reside among them, and if we are Seekers of that same God, wouldn’t we do everything in our power to reside among them as well? If we are as many of us say “Followers of Christ,” should we not follow him THERE? Let us go together, then.

Shalom