



VILLAGE
CHURCH
Presbyterian (USA)

Living Toward God's Promised Day

SCRIPTURE:
Mark 1:9-15

October 15, 2023 – Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Our former director of administration, Kathy Lueckert, was in my office and she asked, “What is that on your shelf?” I said, “Kathy, it’s a clock.” She said, “I know that, but it’s stuck on 6:59 and never moves. For over two years, that clock has said it’s 6:59. What is that about?”

“Oh, it’s a long story. I’ll tell you sometime.” And I will tell you, but not yet.

Jesus began his ministry with these words: “The kingdom of God has come near.” His entire ministry was about that promised kingdom. What Jesus called the ‘kingdom of God,’ we call ‘God’s promised day.’

I don’t know what you think of when you think of God’s promised day. Maybe you think of the healing of old wounds. Maybe you think of that which is broken being made right. Maybe it’s simpler for you—just rest, peace and a sense of belonging.

Jesus thought it would be the day when justice would roll down like waters because we would finally value fairness over privilege. Jesus thought it would be a day when swords are beaten into plowshares because we would rather feed one another than kill one another. We are seeing once again how assumed righteousness leads to fruitless violence leaving the slaughter of the innocents in the land Jesus called home. And there are no heroes.

Jesus thought it would be a day when all that has gone wrong would be made right because the power of God’s love would resurrect life from all that is dead in us and the world. He gave his life for that elusive day and you do, too. And from time to time, we get a glimpse of it.

I remember when we were building the Meneilly Center. I mentioned this story a couple weeks ago. That decision bothered some of our neighbors. Two or three of them started talking about our ministry in ways that were less than truthful. Yard signs of

protest went up. A lawsuit was filed to stop construction. The Session met to decide how to respond. There was disappointment and some frustration that we were being spoken of in such a way. But there was wisdom on your Session, and someone said, “I am confident that there are more people in this neighborhood who would want us to feed the hungry than not.” We met with the neighbors; the tension eased. The ministry moved forward. In the end, some of the neighbors who protested began volunteering at the pantry and the person who filed the lawsuit ended up bringing produce from his garden. It wasn’t the fullness of God’s promised day, but it was a glimpse of it.

That happens here. From time to time, the love of God shows up in such palpable ways that that promised day that Jesus spoke of seems near.

I stood before a couple, flowers all around. I won’t say their names, but it has happened numerous times. I said, “Repeat after me. I promise to be loving and faithful in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health.” It’s always a joyful moment. But sometimes the joy has something of a resurrected quality to it because I had stood with her before, fresh-turned dirt, flowers there then, too. But that earlier time her heart was so broken in grief it was not possible to imagine joy coming again. But on this day, several years later, the heart expanded to claim a love anew—the gift of a new day. It wasn’t the fullness of that promised day, but we could see a glimpse of it from here.

It happens at Village from time to time. The love of God shows up in such palpable ways that the boldest promises of Jesus seem so magnetic we have to live toward them.

I had been largely vegetarian for a decade, but this particular day I was having barbecue for lunch and it was delicious. Some friends from Stanley were asking if Village could launch what they called a satellite

campus. I said, “I don’t think you want us to do that.” “Why?” She asked. “Because you have just fought to save this congregation and Village is not Stanley. If you become Village, the congregation you fought to save will go away. It will be a different church.” Kelly Thomason, with tears in her eyes—which will be no surprise to those of you who know her—said, “We didn’t fight to save a single congregation. We fought to save a just and gracious and welcoming witness to the Gospel in this place.” She was casting a vision for Village on Antioch.

It wasn’t the fullness of the promised day, but it was a glimpse. That happens from time to time here at Village.

There are some moments here at Village that I have heard about. I wish I could have been here the day Virginia and Don Sewing joined Village Church. They pushed against the deed restrictions prohibiting Jews and people of color from buying property in these neighborhoods. As the first Black family to move into Fairway, they displayed amazing courage. Dr. Bob, like he did with everyone, knocked on their door and promised they would be welcomed at Village. Dr. Bob knew that the church is always on the right path when we are known for whom we welcome rather than whom we keep out. No way to know on that day that young Henry, probably wearing knee pants and playing with Legos, would later become a leader in this church, even serving as clerk of Session. I wish I had been here when they joined.

And I wish I had been here in December of 1963 when the congregational nominating committee presented their nominees for elders. The slate included one Phyllis Matchette, as she was elected as the first female elder at Village. It was a holy day. Not even Phyllis could imagine what would follow. Phyllis would be followed by a long line of faithful, compassionate, remarkable women—four of whom serve as your pastors today. Dr. Bob was right; we are on the right path when we are known for who we include rather than who we exclude.

Which makes me particularly grateful that I was here on Nov. 3, 2019. For the lion’s share of my ministry, the Presbyterian Church debated who was qualified to serve as elders, deacons and pastors. Specifically, if you fell in love with someone of the same gender, you were deemed unworthy to serve. Village

was among many in our denomination who challenged this exclusive theology. And on Nov. 3, 2019 you called a woman who is among the most courageous women I know because she said yes to God when the church was still saying no to her. But Sally Wright waited patiently on the church to catch up with God and when the church did, it gave you room to call her as a pastor. And for me, it was a day when the promised day of Jesus Christ crawled just a bit closer. It happens here at Village from time to time.

I walked into the clinic in Thwake, Kenya, which was serving as a dental office for the day. I watched Dr. Woolsey standing over open mouth after open mouth, all day long, head-lamp on his forehead, providing dental care to people who had no access to regular care. Lucy Tidwell was sitting outside over a pressure cooker sterilizing instruments that she would pass through the open window when Dr. Woolsey needed them.

The next day we gathered in the church. David Nzioka invited me to preach and he would translate. Truth be told, I think he listened to me and gave them an upgrade in the translation. That day I preached to a people with whom I have absolutely nothing in common except Jesus. It was clear that day that when you have Jesus in common, it is enough to overcome everything that divides.

It was a holy day and a day when the boldest promises of Jesus seemed palpable and trustworthy. That promised day of Jesus seems so magnetic you cannot help but live toward it. We have never seen that day, but as people of faith, it is the day on which we base our lives.

Kathy Lueckert asked, “Tom, what is that? Why do you have a clock that doesn’t work sitting on your shelf?” That’s when I told her about the first time we met. It was December of 2003. We met in Friendship Hall where George Satterlee and his friends were trying to convince you to call Carol and me to join you in ministry. I told you, when I was a kid, we had a rule in our house. Christmas morning could not start before 7 a.m. My father was a pastor, too, and he would spend Christmas Eves leading worship. He would come home after the last service and often enter the land of some-assembly-required, finally falling into bed in the wee hours. Hence the rule: Do not wake the parents until 7 a.m. We were told that

Santa would take everything back if we woke them before 7, so we never did. So, my siblings and I sat in the hallway when we woke up, at about 5:30 or so, and watch the clock on their bedside table.

They had a clock like this one. No hands; just numbers that flipped down. From the hallway, we would watch the numbers slowly fall. Eventually, the clock would reach 6:59 a.m. And it seemed to me, at that moment, the clock broke. This was the longest minute of the morning. But then, the double zeros would fall and we were in the bedroom. “It’s Christmas, it’s Christmas!” I loved it. In that moment, 6:59, I didn’t know what was coming or what I would find in the day, but I knew it would be good.

I told you that was how I felt in December of 2003. I didn’t know what God would do among us—I didn’t know about Katrina or Better by Sunday or Village University or the Gathering or this masterful organ or Village on Antioch or signature mission, I knew none of that—but I knew that God would meet us

and it would be good. I have remembered some of those moments with you today, just a few; there are many more. But I have remembered them so that you remember that God showed up from time to time.

I am telling you this because today I again know what time it is: it is 6:59. I do not know what God will do for and through you, Village, in the years to come, but I am confident that it will be good. We have a rich history. But I know this: The days ahead of us matter as much to God as the days behind us. So it is 6:59 and I know it will be good.

I see the talent and faith in this chancel and I know it will be good. I see the commitment in your heart to do the good that is yours to do and I know it will be good. There are more stories coming. I don’t know what they will be but it is 6:59 because God has promised us a day when all that has gone wrong will be made right and we are living toward God’s promised day.