

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
April 8 & 9, 2017
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Regime Change | Mark 14, Luke 7**

Well, this is a big day for the Tshihambas—Andrea and me, and Jake and the rest of our kids, and it's not like we haven't been anticipating this day for a while. After all, I gave a one hundred day notice! We are, nevertheless, surprised that time goes by so fast and here we are with mixed emotions. We're both excited about something that we feel clearly God is leading us to, but also have a sense of sadness as we acknowledge that in order for something to start that means that necessarily something has to end. In our case that means fellowship and proximity with a community that has embraced us, loved us, and nurtured us throughout these 13 years, and has also enthusiastically embraced my leadership as a pastor here. We've traveled both literally and figuratively to places that none of us could have imagined 13 years ago, and so for that I just want to say a deep thank you. Thank you so much.

Probably one of the most controversial areas of foreign policy is the whole concept of regime change. When we talk about regime change, generally what we mean by that is that we're replacing one regime—government regime—for another. I've been thinking a lot about the idea of regime change, especially these days, as I prepare to step away from my role at CPC and to start work with an organization that operates in a context where regime change is on most people's minds all the time. In the nearly 60 years that the Congo has been independent, regime change has been the subtext of its very existence. Now, every four or eight years in this country we're confronted with a deeply felt human truth. We love a champion—a person who has the insight to pinpoint our weaknesses and vulnerabilities and who comes in and promises radical change that will replace that weakness with strength and with power. Now of course, we don't call it regime change in our setting, we call it a change in administration, but whether it's by revolution or by election, the principle is the same and you hear it from the left and you hear it from the right, it's the same message. It's basically this: I feel your pain. I know what you're going through. You're weak now, you're economically marginalized, you're culturally silenced, you're educationally short-shifted, but I am the champion who will take you from weakness to strength. And while history is sprinkled here and there with compassionate and altruistic champions of the weak, if we're honest, we know that even they never are powerful enough to fully execute on their vision. They face all kinds of limitations within and without, and sadly more often than not, our history books are filled to the gills, are filled with an avalanche of examples of sinister, deceitful champions who exploit the weak for their own gain—Lennon, Hitler, Kim Jong-un, Bashar Asaad— I'm sure you don't have to look very far to come up with a name or two of your own to add to that list, and sadly the story of deceit and empty promises of power is as old as

humanity itself. When long ago a powerful voice whispered to our first parents *you're weak now, you're creationally marginalized, you're intellectually blinded, you're lied to, but I am the champion who will take you from weakness to power*, our first parents traded a father for a despot, a God for a tyrant. And so the regime of Satan was born, a regime where all of humanity wasn't made more powerful, but actually fell from a position of power into a profound weakness—the weakness of war within ourselves and with the very God who created us, which only highlighted all the more the desperate need for a champion, a true champion who would put an end to Satan's destructive regime. God, in His grace, has given us such a champion, a champion who's powerful enough to execute the vision of His regime no matter what, a champion who is not after his own power, but really after empowering the weak. Jesus has brought humanity's greatest regime change. It's a regime change that has effectively moved humanity from weakness to power and a regime in which weakness and power have been inverted—the tables have been turned.

When my boys were little, we used to—I don't even remember if they would remember this or not—we used to wrestle a lot on the carpet in the living room and just have a lot of fun. For fun I would challenge them to a wrestling match, an arm wrestling match. I think they must have been 2 and 4 at the time, and as they were sitting there gritting their teeth and pushing down as hard as they possibly could, I would taunt them. I'd say something like this: "Okay guys, anytime you're ready just let me know." "Let me know when you're starting." "Okay, anytime you're ready." Then I would ever so slowly start pushing, and with great relish and satisfaction, kind of slam their arms down to the ground. I know some of you are thinking, *what kind of a parent are you? People like you should not be allowed to have kids*, but this is a picture of us. We were gritting our teeth, pushing against demonic oppression, hatred within, violence without, and the fear of death...but the arm of Satan just kept pushing back, exploiting and taunting our human weakness and our sin, because under him we were just too weak. But imagine now if my kids could have this lifeline to Arnold Schwarzenegger—not today's Arnold Schwarzenegger, but the 1980s Conan the Barbarian Arnold Schwarzenegger, right? I'm pretty sure that I couldn't compete with that. Likewise, so that we would no longer be crushed by the strength of Satan, God Himself gave us a lifeline in the truest sense—in Jesus Christ—to push back and topple Satan's regime and take us from weakness to power, which brings us to our text for this morning out of Luke 19.

²⁸ After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹ As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying, ³⁰ "Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' say, 'The Lord needs it.'" ³² Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you

untying the colt?" ³⁴ They replied, "The Lord needs it." [You should try this next time you want to steal something. See how it works.] ³⁵ They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: ³⁸ "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" ³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" ⁴⁰ "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." [Luke 19:28-40]

Now context is always important, so I want to help out by giving a little bit of background. On Palm Sunday Jesus enters into Jerusalem. He comes in as a triumphant king and He is a king, but He's not an ordinary king because His kingdom is unlike anything anyone had ever seen. And if people were astute and listening and had read the Scriptures, this is what they were expecting, this is what they had been praying for. They had been under the boot of Rome, reduced to nothing more than a puppet state. They didn't have a king because the Romans wouldn't let them have one. They could still have a high priest, but the Romans said *we get to appoint that priest. We get to approve who you choose, and just to make sure that high priest never gets any crazy ideas about leading a revolt or anything like that, like creating a Jewish state, we're going to keep the ceremonial robes of your priest in our guard towers. We'll just keep them locked up there. We'll let you have them at Passover and other holy holidays, but only if you behave yourselves. And in case the people who come to the temple get any crazy ideas, we've built this gigantic fortress called the Antonia (named after Mark Antony) right up next to your temple, okay? That's right, we built it right smack on the top, the heart of your nation, right next to the most precious thing that you have...the structure that means the most to you. Now your temple will fall under the deep dark shadow of our fortress.*

We're talking about raw, unfiltered power. Now, Passover wasn't just this thing for Jews who lived in Jerusalem; it brought 200,000-300,000 extra pilgrims into the city. Many of the people who came, often traveling long distances, were called Zealots. Today we would call them radicals, we'd call them extremists, fanatics, militants...I think you get the picture. And all it would take is just a little spark to really set the whole city ablaze. Every spare room close to the city was filled to the gills, and remember, this is the biggest holiday of the Jewish year, so the Pharisees came and they approached Jesus. They were a little stressed out; they were a little bit on edge. They wanted Jesus to turn down the volume on His ministry, they wanted Him to reel it back, they wanted Him to cool His jets. Their concern is perfectly rational, it's perfectly reasonable and understandable because things in Rome were a little bit on edge—the last thing they needed was a riot or some sort of excuse for Rome to turn up the heat in the city, especially during the time of Passover. You may remember Passover is the celebration

of their freedom from what? Their freedom from oppression, from an oppressive enslavement in Egypt. Now, you're going to compare their stories there, right? You think it was lost on the Roman occupiers as hundreds of thousands of people gather together to celebrate their freedom from bondage? You think the Romans knew what they were gathering to celebrate about? And now you have this impromptu parade, this impromptu heroes parade, and the Pharisees tell Jesus, "Jesus, shhhh, tell Your disciples to be quiet or else they'll get us all killed." This march was pregnant with anticipation, with expectation. Jesus is on a collision course; He's on a trajectory that can't be stopped. Nothing can stop the processional to the cross. This march to the cross was a march toward the end of Satan's exalted place of power over humanity. On the cross, Jesus was about to do on our behalf what you and I could never do. He would decisively and single-handedly deal the death blow to Satan's regime, and that's where He's headed in this passage—to Jerusalem, to the cross. It would be on the cross that Jesus faced Satan's most powerful weapon against humanity: death. Not just death of the body, but death of our very being. It would be on the cross that Jesus wrenched death from Satan's power by Himself rising from the dead.

Now, the image that captures this would be my boys and me during this wrestling match, and my hand slamming theirs to the ground...in this wrestling match that they could never possibly win. Then Arnold comes along and boom, he slams my hand down to the ground. Now, as true as that analogy might be, as true as that image might be, it's not the truth that's being highlighted in this particular passage here. Jesus our champion says, "You're trying to stop what cannot be stopped." He says, "If My disciples were to keep quiet, if My disciples were to keep to themselves, these very stones, these rocks that you see here would cry out." I imagine Jesus pointing to those ancient stones, and as He does, I think Jesus is pointing toward the most explosive subject of all—the subject of the resurrection. He's talking about the dead coming back to life. He's talking about Hosanna coming from the grave. He's talking about the undoing of all that is wrong and broken and tragic in this world. There are just some things that you can't keep quiet. There are some realities that are just too good to keep in.

You see, for years and years Jesus and His ministry—if you've read the Gospels maybe you've noticed this pattern—would go around and He would heal someone and He would proclaim hope to someone. He would turn to them and say, "Now I want you to go home and not tell anybody about this." Now, I've never understood this—it's been a head scratcher for me. If I were in charge, if I were His marketing director, if I were running His PR, I'd tell Him, "Jesus, I think you have it all wrong. You need to open a Twitter account. You don't need to be obnoxious about it or anything, but You need to know what You're doing." Certainly if I were running a Presidential campaign, let alone a messy ad campaign, but not Jesus. He walks around and He doesn't want to draw attention to Himself. It's what the scholars refer to as the "messianic secret." Jesus tries

to do as much as He can to stay under the radar, and as He does this there comes a point where things shift. There comes this divine appointment that Jesus has in Jerusalem. This divine appointment that He has at the cross. And now as Jesus is on this unstoppable journey toward the cross He says, *You know what? Now it's time to crank up the volume, for nothing can stop, nothing can silence heaven's invasion song.*

So what does this mean for us? Well, first it means that you can change earthly regimes all you want but still be stuck under the regime of Satan. In other words, fighting simply on the plane of steering our political regime to the right or to the left will never get far enough, because none of that will strike at the heart of Satan's regime. The only champion who will bring us out of Satan's regime—where we are weak in sin and headed toward death—is Jesus. But will you allow me to say what it doesn't mean? It doesn't mean that we shouldn't strive to labor on the plane of earthly regimes or that we shouldn't struggle for change in the here and now. Jesus's regime doesn't apply simply to the so called spiritual things. N.T. Wright says this:

“Jesus' task was not simply to teach people a new way of life. Not simply to offer a new depth of spirituality. Not simply to enable them to go to heaven after death. Jesus' task was to defeat Satan, break his power, win the decisive victory which would open up the way to God's new creation, in which evil, and even death itself would be banished.”

As I leave CPC to work in transformative change in the Congo, I realize that I'm heading into a context that seems impossible and hopeless. Some would argue it seems a lost cause, and I'm not naive. On the contrary, it's because I've witnessed, in the context of utter weakness, what happens when the weak of this world confound the strong and the powerful, not by might or by power, but in the power and the resources of our champion.

A South African woman stood in a packed court room, listening to testimony of white police officers, as they admitted under oath the atrocities that they had perpetrated in the name of apartheid. Officer Vanderbrooke acknowledged his responsibility in the death of her son along with others. He had shot her 18-year-old son at point blank range, and then he and his colleagues partied while they burned his body, turning it over and over on the fire until it was reduced to ashes. Eight years later, Vanderbrooke and his friends arrived and grabbed her husband from their home. A few hours later, shortly after midnight, Vanderbrooke came back to fetch the woman. He took her to the wood pile where her husband laid bound, and she was forced to watch as they doused him with gasoline and lit him on fire. The last words she heard her husband say were, “Forgive them.” Now, Vanderbrooke stood in this courtroom before this woman, awaiting judgment. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission asked her what she wanted and here's what she said, “First, I want Mr. Vanderbrooke to take me to the place where they burned my husband's body. I would like to gather up the dust and give him a decent burial. Second, Mr. Vanderbrooke took all my family away from me and I

still have a lot of love to give, so twice a month I would like him to come to my home in our township and spend a day with me so that I can be a mother to him. Third, I would like Mr. Vanderbrooke to know that he is forgiven by God and that I forgive him too. I would like someone in this courtroom to lead me to where he is seated so that I can embrace him and he can know that my forgiveness is real.” As the elderly woman was led across the courtroom, Mr. Vanderbrooke fainted, overwhelmed by this, and then someone started singing Amazing Grace. Eventually everyone in the room was singing.

This woman understood what our world fails to understand—that regime change, true regime change, doesn’t happen through earthly might. True regime change doesn’t occur through carefully orchestrated battle plans. True regime change isn’t engineered in smoke-filled rooms behind closed doors. True regime change was accomplished once and for all through the act of Christ being crucified, Christ dying, and most importantly, rising from the grave. This woman understood the implications for herself and for the world, that to be reconciled with God and to be reconciled with neighbors and enemies is to be free indeed.

So, the next time someone tells you to tone it down with this Jesus thing, the next time someone tells you to play it safe and to not take risks with Christ, the next time someone tells you at school, or in your neighborhood, or in your community, or in your place of work, that they don’t want you to upset the careful political balance that they have there, you need to remind them, and you need to remind yourself, that there are truths that are just too good to keep quiet. That regime change is not optional, regime change is inevitable. That there are some victories that have to be celebrated my friends, and at the center of it all, as Paul reminds us, “If Christ has not been raised, then we are of all people, most to be pitied.” [1Corinthians 15:17]

Now, I think some of you may be thinking, *hold on pastor, hold on Paul, slow down a minute, hold your horses. It sounds like you’re preaching an Easter sermon. Isn’t that John Crosby’s gig for next week? What are you doing?* But according to the Gospel of Luke, according to the message of Jesus, it’s all about Easter, amen? It’s all about Easter and Easter is all about grace. It’s all about amazing grace. The amazing grace that has the power to turn the tables upside down. The powerful, sweet amazing grace that has the power to save wretches like you and a wretch like me and all of those wretches out there that are too far gone and too far removed to be redeemable by God. That grace that relieves our worst fears. That grace that secures our own hope. That grace that even ten thousand years from now will shine as bright as the sun. They couldn’t seal that tomb on Easter Sunday and no amount of human effort will stop God’s final resurrection power. The eternal song of that first Palm Sunday when they shouted their Hosannas was more appropriate than they could have ever known. When they said “Hosanna! God save us!” they didn’t really know the full extent of what they were praying for. Nothing in all creation could fully anticipate and will never be able to

ultimately silence the shout of the new day in Christ.

There are moments, my friends, where you can choose to join with that great song of salvation. Let no one tell you to keep that quiet.

Paul starts singing Amazing Grace and the congregation joins in.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.