



## LIVING THE DREAM: THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN GLOBAL MISSION

BY AL TIZON

### 🔥 TEXT:

### Acts 1:1-11

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Greetings! My name is Al Tizon, and I serve as the executive minister of Serve Globally. My job of overseeing the international ministries of our denomination takes me literally all over the world. It's a beautiful thing to go and see what's going on across cultures and around the world through our global personnel and partners. Besides being a little dizzy from time-zone hopping (the closest thing to time-travel that one can experience), I travel in awe as I see what God is doing in and through this little but thoroughly global family of faith called the Evangelical Covenant Church.

**I'm honored today to share a few thoughts with you from Acts 1.**

A clever response of some these days to the question, "How are you, or how you doing?" is "I'm living the dream." It's a cut above "Fine," to be sure, but are you really? Are you—are we—living the dream? If so, what dream? Whose dream? What are we talking about? My hope is, if and when followers of Jesus say it, we mean *the* dream, God's dream, as God has revealed it.

One memorable place I went the last few years was Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, as I tagged along with the Covenant World Relief team. We gathered our community development partners there, amazing people from all over Africa, to sharpen and encourage one another in the grueling work of community development. Since that trip, I'm convinced more than ever before that we in the West have much to learn from our African partners. It was an amazing week of inspiration and learning.

But for me, it was also a week of cringing, as I remembered my own attempts to do development work in the Philippines back in the day. So embarrassing in light of what I was hearing from our African partners! We did it wrong in so many ways.

There was at least one thing we did right though, I believe. We operated under the basic premise that if the people of the community are the ones to determine the whats and the hows of projects or initiatives, then the better chance they have to succeed. So in our community gatherings, we'd ask a question to start things off that went something like this: "Friends, if God were mayor around here, what would be different?"

Now this was the Philippines, so God-talk was not a problem. In fact, it was perfectly natural to include God in common conversation. What wasn't so natural among the poor was getting people to try to imagine a different kind of life. It often took a few meetings to get them to engage in the question, but eventually people started to play along. At first, the responses would be funny—some man would stand up and say, "If God was in charge, I'd be married to Marilyn Monroe." Then someone else would say, "Yeah, and we'd all be



driving BMWs, and money would be growing on trees,” and so on. Prosperity-genie-god would have his five minutes, and we’d all laugh, which was a good thing.

But after a while, someone—usually a woman—would get serious and say something like, “If God were mayor, we’d all have homes made of cement so the floods wouldn’t wipe us out every year.” And then another would say, “Our kids wouldn’t die of typhoid, pneumonia, and other treatable diseases.” And then the responses would start to pop like popcorn around the room:

- If God were mayor, our children would go to school in ironed uniforms and learn how to read and write and do math.
- Our husbands would have jobs, and they wouldn’t drink so much, and they wouldn’t have mistresses on the side.
- Our wives and daughters wouldn’t have to work at the red-light district or work in foreign lands as maids.
- There would be no more domestic abuse and violence and crime.
- There’d be clean water that we wouldn’t have to walk miles to fetch.
- God would protect us from the government that harasses us and beats us and forces us to move.
- We would own this land, grow our own vegetables, put a fish pond in the middle of that field, and own cows and pigs.
- If God were mayor, we would go over to God’s house and fellowship there and worship there every day.

What we attempted to do in those town hall meetings was to awaken within the people the ability to dream again, and dream our friends did. They dreamed of a world where there will be no more mourning and crying and pain; where

there will be no more death, just life and peace.

Without really knowing it, our friends in those desperately poor communities dreamed about the kingdom of God wherein Christ dwells—not only dwells, but reigns in righteousness and justice, peace and love. And when the poor in these communities began to dream, we knew that the work of community transformation had begun. I was convinced then, and even more so today, that any enduring transformation in Christ—whether we’re talking about personal or community or world—begins with our ability to dream the kingdom dream.

### I. ALL ABOUT THE KINGDOM (v. 3).

As the mission guy, I must have read this morning’s text a hundred times in my Bible-reading life. Usually, it’s verse 8 where I end up spending the most time. Recently though, it has been verse 3 that has been glowing for me: “After his suffering Jesus presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them forty days [and here’s when it starts to glow] and speaking to them about the kingdom of God.”

That’s our mission, you know: to bear witness in word and deed to the kingdom of God. It’s our mission, because it was Jesus’s mission. From beginning to end—from his birth to his ascension—Jesus was all about the reign, or kingdom, of God. One way to understand the mission of Jesus is that he essentially helped people to dream again according to the kingdom—to be captivated and motivated by God’s beautiful and certain future. I get excited to think about our mission as enabling people to dream the kingdom dream in a world that has forgotten that God is alive and on the move, directing history toward the fulfillment of that dream.

Our friends in those communities I served back in the day, who started to imagine life with God in the center echoed other dreamers found in the Scriptures, such as the prophet Isaiah, who heard God say, “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth....No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall



there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime...They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity... The wolf and the lamb shall feed together” (65:17).

Another dreamer: In Revelation 7, John caught a glimpse of the same dream but further in the future. He saw a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were all poised for worship, because the one standing in front of them put an end to hunger, thirst, tears, suffering, persecution, and pain.

From the Old Testament to the New, it's all about the kingdom dream. And I want to remind us that the kingdom dream is not just a pipe dream. It's not just wishful thinking. The kingdom of God is not a metaphor! It's real; we catch glimpses of it right now in the present—whenever someone turns to Christ, or a healing takes place, or a poor community is empowered, or when we do right by refugees, or when stores like REI and Dick's Sporting Goods decide not to sell AR-15s anymore. These and many other events cause us to say, “There is the kingdom!” They point to the truth that God's kingdom of peace, justice, and salvation will prevail.

Meanwhile, our mission is to reflect this coming kingdom, and to extend God's invitation for all to enter, even now, into the joy of kingdom life. Our mission is all about bearing witness to the kingdom dream in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and the ends of the earth.

## II. NOT ABOUT US (vv. 4-8).

It's all about the kingdom of God. In verse 3 we read that the risen Jesus reviewed with his followers about the kingdom for 40 days. When this verse becomes the central verse of this passage, the verses that follow take on a different character for me—they start to blink and flash, like warning lights. So I ask, what could Jesus be warning us about in light of the kingdom?

### A. Not Relying on Ourselves to Fulfill the Dream (vv. 4-5).

One warning is in vv. 4-5, where Jesus tells his disciples to stay put and wait for the promise of the Holy Spirit. I hear him say it like this: “Now friends, don't go anywhere, and don't do anything until the Holy Spirit comes upon you, okay? I've been reviewing the kingdom dream with you for the last 40 days, but not to give you the impression that you can somehow fulfill it yourselves.” That's blinking, flashing warning light #1: Don't try to fulfill the kingdom dream on our own. This is ultimately God's dream to fulfill.

To remind myself of this, I've been gradually phasing out certain words from my theological vocabulary—words like, “building” or “advancing” or “furthering” the kingdom; because frankly, our actions don't build, advance, or further anything of the kingdom. I've been gradually replacing those with words like, “demonstrate” or “reflect” or “point others in the direction of” the kingdom. That might sound hair-splitting for some, but anything that reminds us that the kingdom dream is God's is a good thing.

It's when we try to “live the dream” on our own, however well-intentioned and impassioned, that we find ourselves spinning our wheels, burning out, wasting time and energy, and hurting ourselves and other people. The church isn't just weak and ineffective without the Spirit; it can be downright dangerous and destructive. In fact, as I've studied the underside of missions history—or the colonial model of spreading the gospel in the non-Western world—I've become more and more convinced that all the paternalism, condescension, manifest destiny, destruction of indigenous cultures, racism, slavery, etc., were the consequence of doing missions without the Holy Spirit!

O Lord, forgive us and give us the patience to wait on your Spirit before trying to live the kingdom dream in any way, shape, or form. Amen.

Church, without the Spirit, the beautiful and powerful Christian faith devolves into rote worship, doctrinaire legalism, irrelevant theology, lifeless catechism,



manipulative evangelism, and dangerous mission. So, Jesus said, “Please don’t go anywhere and don’t do anything until the Holy Spirit comes, okay? Please?”

### **B. Not Settling for Lesser Dreams (vv. 6-8).**

I see another blinking, flashing warning light in verses 6-8. It’s all about the kingdom dream for the whole world and nothing less, if we take our cue from the ministry of Jesus. Blinking, flashing warning light #2 is this: Don’t settle for a lesser, nationalistic dream!

The kingdom dream is for the whole world. The disciples didn’t seem to get this, of course. In verse 6, they ask, “Lord, is it at this time that you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Now I imagine Jesus at this point, second-guessing his choice of disciples, saying to himself, “They still don’t get it, do they? After three years of teaching and demonstrating the kingdom in their midst, and more recently after 40 days of reviewing the kingdom with them—this is the question they ask me?” Jesus had been for years speaking and showing the justice, righteousness, peace, forgiveness, and love of the kingdom of God for the whole world, but what his closest companions wanted to know from the risen Jesus was, “Lord, is it at this time that you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Despite sharing all the glories and mysteries of the kingdom dream, the disciples couldn’t break out of their nationalist thinking; they were “Israel first.” They mistook the kingdom dream for a dream only for Israel.

Well, good thing we’re more enlightened than those original disciples, right?! It’s no different today, is it, sisters and brothers? We can so easily fall for the allure of a lesser dream. But it’s not about the Israelite dream; it’s not about the American dream; it’s not about “making America great again,” especially if making it great again means marginalizing, disadvantaging, and harassing others.

Folks, Jesus’s teaching on the kingdom is not about national greatness, whatever our view of national greatness may be. The dream of national greatness is not big enough

for followers of the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

This was Jesus’s response to the disciples’ small question. After saying it wasn’t for them to know when God was going to do anything, he reminded them of the bigness of the dream. The kingdom dream isn’t just for Israel; yes, it’s for Jerusalem, but it’s also for Judea and Samaria; it’s for Palestine too, and Egypt, Congo, Thailand, Philippines, Mexico, Russia, the United States, and for the rest of the 200+ nations that make up today’s world. That’s how big my dream is, my disciples. And furthermore—verse 8—you shall be my witnesses in all these places of the kingdom dream for all. Oh, to embrace that dream! Let’s live that dream, the kingdom dream, and nothing less. And let’s awaken others to this dream and nothing less, across cultures and around the world.

**Conclusion** –There’s one more warning light I see in the passage, and I conclude with this. Verses 9-11 say that Jesus was lifted up to the sky, and as the disciples witnessed this gravity-defying event, they began to gaze. Who wouldn’t, right? They gazed and gazed and kept on gazing until two angels had to come to jolt them back to reality. They asked, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Concluding blinking, flashing warning light #3 is this: Don’t gaze up in the sky too long looking for Jesus. It’s time now to look for him among the refugees, the immigrants, the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, the traumatized, the despairing, the lost. Time now to engage the world around you with the good news of God’s kingdom. Time to do justice and love mercy; to tell any and all about the dream that will become a reality in Christ. Time now to turn from our vertical gaze to the horizontal and pray, “Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

“Time to live the dream,” the angels said, “to bear witness to the coming kingdom in Jesus’s name and by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Amen.