

“Glorious and Gentle Rule”
Christ the King Sunday
November 25, 2018
2 Samuel 23:1-7 & John 13:33-37
First United Methodist Church, Baraboo
Pastor Marianne Cotter

He was a prisoner and yet he was a king. John 18:33-37 tells how Jesus was a prisoner Pilate, the Roman Governor. He’s been questioned by the chief priest and the religious leaders and now Jesus has been brought to Pilate. Jesus is a prisoner but his reign as king is just now being revealed.

Jesus and Pilate talk about kingship. Jesus’ ideas are subversive. You would think Jesus would be afraid. Pilate has the power to put him to death. But Jesus is not anxious, angry or defensive. It begins to sound like Pilate is on trial. “Are you the King of the Jews?” Pilate asks. Jesus answers “do you say this on your own or have others spoken to you about me?” Pilate’s reply shows frustration: “I’m not a Jew, am I? Your nation and its chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?” “My kingdom did not originate from this world. if it did my guards would fight so that I wouldn’t have been arrested by the Jewish leaders. My kingdom isn’t from here.” “So you are a king” Pilate replied. Again Jesus dodges the question: “You say that I am a king.” In what follows next, Jesus the King will come into his glory.

His glory, like his kingdom, is subversive. The crowd is given a choice: release Jesus or Barabbas. The crowd chooses Barabbas. Jesus is then whipped. The soldiers put a crown of thorns and a purple robe on him. Jesus is mocked, then led up to the place of the Skull, Golgotha to die. Pilate has a sign posted on the cross “Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews.” When the chief priests object and want the sign to read “this man said I am the king of the Jews” Pilate answers “what I’ve written, I’ve written.” Jesus dies. He is buried. He is raised from the dead and he ascends into heaven. These seamless events build one on the other until Jesus reigns in glory in heaven. This is John’s story of Jesus the king. Much earlier in the gospel Jesus predict that when he is lifted up from the earth, he will draw all people to himself. In his death for the sins of the whole world, Jesus will become the redeemer king, sharing God the creator’s reign over all creation.

Jesus was a prisoner yet he was a king. Jesus was gentle but he was not weak. To be gentle is to be kind, tender, mild-mannered. Jesus subverted the idea of kingship and glory and now Jesus subverts our ideas of gentleness. We glimpse his powerful gentleness in his response to Pilate’s statement “so you are a king!” Jesus answered “You say that I am a king. I was born and came into the world for this reason: to testify to the truth. Whoever accepts the truth listens to my voice.” Truth is the only

power the Jesus wields. When Jesus says “I was born and came into the world to testify to the truth” he meant he came to witness to what John 1 tells us: that in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and “The Word became flesh and made his home among us. In Jesus we see God’s glory, the glory of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. Jesus testifies to this truth and he is the truth. I am the “way, the truth and the life” he says in John 14:6.

John 13:37 reads “Whoever accepts the truth listens to my voice.” Here is an echo of what was in John chapter 10 where Jesus calls himself the good shepherd. The sheep listen to the voice of their shepherd; as the people listen for the voice of their king. For the Hebrews and other ancient peoples, good kings were like shepherds: kind, vigilant, watchful, protecting their flock.

“I am the good shepherd” Jesus says in John 10. “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.... The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

Jesus was a prisoner and yet he was a king. Jesus was gentle but he was not weak. His power was truth telling and self-giving love. The Jewish religious leaders seemed to have the power to make life hard (even impossible) for Jesus. The crowd seemed to have the power to choose Barabbas to be the one to receive mercy instead of Jesus. Pilate seemed to have the power to end Jesus’ life. But in fact Jesus who had the power to choose to lay down his life for this flock. This is the truth to which we testify as Jesus’ followers.

To connect this story to the story of our lives, I want to tell you a story of something that happened in 1922. That year a new pope named Pius XI began shepherding his world wide flock of the Roman Catholic church. That year the dangers to his flock were many. One was anti-clericalism, the result of decades of tension between the church and Italian political leaders. There was the threat of fascism, a threat disguised as a promise. Fascism’s promise was if you gave your loyalty to an authoritarian leader (and the state organized under his rule) you will have security and stability. The fascist state promised peace and well being. There was the threat of communism. This too held a promise: in place of cruel elite despots, a state government now has come into being – all will now share land and wealth. The Communist state would now be the answer to people’s prayers for peace and prosperity. To Pius XI, the wolves were circling his faithful flock. Faith seemed to be

under attack everywhere. So, in 1925 Pope Pius XI declared the last Sunday before the season of Advent the Feast of Christ the King. This would be a day on the church calendar to remember that Christ is the ruler of all; only in God can we have true peace. : He is our King – he’s the ruler of our lives. He is supreme over all earthly powers, fascism, not communism, and secularism.

That was 1925. This is 2018. The kingdom of God, which Christ came to usher in, is still clashing with the kingdoms of this world. Where are those clashes taking place? A warning: this part of the sermon just may sound too political for a Sunday sermon. Yet from my reading of John’s gospel it’s clear to me that unless we hear Jesus’ timeless challenge to the powers of this world, I don’t believe we have really heard him. I don’t believe we have truly seen him as who he is: our king, who rules over all the kingdoms of this world. So, where is this clash between Jesus’ kingdom and the kingdoms of the world taking place today? Wherever there are people saying loyalty to your country takes precedence over loyalty to God. That’s Nationalism. This clash is taking place wherever people believe that having more things and buying more stuff will make us happier and more secure. That’s consumerism (materialism).

And there is a very great tension today between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world in the arena of truth. If we read one more verse in our gospel passage today we would have heard Pilate asking Jesus “what is truth?” Like Pilate, we sometimes wonder “what is truth?” We live in a post-truth world. A world of “fake news”, of “alternative facts.” You may remember when that phrase “alternative facts” was first used. It came about in a conversation the size of the crowd at the 2017 presidential inauguration. Aerial photos disproved the president’s press secretary’s claims about the crowd being larger than the previous inaugural parade. Then, a counselor to the president. Kellyanne Conway defended her colleague Sean Spicer saying he was giving “alternative facts.” Later she was sticking to her use of the term "alternative facts" and defining it as "additional facts and alternative information". An “alternative fact” is nota fact it’s a falsehood. Lying for political gain and national security aims is long standing practice. It’s nothing new that American presidents lie. FDR, JFK, Lyndon Johnson and Bill Clinton all told lies at times, often in what they thought was the best interest of the country. What’s different today is that there are journalists and opinion makers who track and argue about the exact number of lies told by the current president. The telling of falsehoods – lies – by those with power has a corrupting influence on all of us. One aspect of our post-truth world that is especially concerning to me is that facts presented by climate scientists can be removed from government web sites for political reasons, and that warnings about dangers of climate change to our planet based on scientific findings can be a presented as just one more aspect of “fake news” or instances of “alternative facts.”

So, here we are on Christ the King Sunday in this post truth world. What’s a follower of Jesus to do? How can we be loyal to Christ our King? We can do three things:

First we can believe the good news that Christ our King really does rule over this post-truth world.

Secondly, we can listen to him. Listen to his words. Pay attention to what he says. Make him first in our lives.

Finally, we can refuse to play the victim as Jesus refused to play the victim. We can moan and groan about how bad things are; we may complain how we don't like the direction things are going in our world. We may feel powerless to make a difference. But as Jesus' followers we have the same power he did; the power to tell the truth. Could staying loyal to him in this world be as simple as telling the truth, whenever we can? Telling the truth of who Jesus is; telling the truth about the world in which we live? "Testify to the truth." It's simple but not easy. Tell the truth in person. Tell the truth on social media. Tell the truth in the coffee shop.

So, happy Christ the King Sunday! Here's good news: Jesus our King is willing to share his crown with us. And he shares his glory and his power too. To win our crown All we have to do is take up our cross, listen for his voice, and testify to the truth.

I leave you with this story from Delores Williams, a professor at Union theological Seminary. Delores grew up in the South and remembers Sunday mornings when the minister shouted out: "Who is Jesus?" The choir responded in voices loud and strong: "King of kings and Lord Almighty!" Then, little Miss Huff, in a voice so fragile and soft you could hardly hear, would sing her own answer, "Poor little Mary's boy." Back and forth they sang: KING OF KINGS and Lord Almighty -- Poor little Mary's boy.

Come back next week, the first Sunday of Advent, to hear again the story of poor little Mary's boy, born to be a king.

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.