

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
November 25, 2018
Title: Christ the King
Scripture: Revelation 1:4b-8
John 18:33-37

“There is a scene in “The Wizard of Oz” in which Dorothy and her friends have finally gained an audience with the legendary Wizard. Smoke fills the air, his voice booms around them, and the four friends quake with fear – until Dorothy’s little dog Toto slips away, pulls back an curtain, and exposes the real Oz. That is when Dorothy and her friends discover that things are not how they first appeared. The great and powerful Oz is not so great and powerful after all.”ⁱ

Something similar happens in our Scripture readings today, but in reverse. Pilate faces Jesus who has been brought to him with the charge that he claims to be the King of the Jews. For years, devout Jews had been hoping for a king like David, someone anointed by God, who would expel foreign rulers and restore the nation to Jewish rule. Make no mistake about it, this was a political charge – the claim would amount to treason – but it also had religious overtones.

There had been others who had claimed to be the Messiah. They had collected followers, and led armed revolts, and had been ruthlessly put down by Rome. During a great pilgrimage festival like Passover, when there were very large numbers of visitors to Jerusalem, there was a heightened tension and a swelling of anti-Roman sentiment.

For the Jewish authorities, the charges against Jesus were ones of blasphemy. They believed Jesus was claiming, or people were attributing

to him, authority that belonged only to God. But to Pilate and the Roman authorities, this was a charge of treason.

Jesus was not about to be drawn into the division of identity politics. He was not a king in any way that people typically think about kings. Royalty is usually associated with absolute power and wealth, with pomp and circumstance. In years gone by, when I thought about royalty I thought about British royalty, whose role today seems to be heavier on the pomp and circumstance side and much lighter on the power side.

Today, I'm more inclined to think about the news and discussions about the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia. I think about the discussion, debates and opinions about his power and whether it is reasonable to believe that he would not have been the person who ordered the killing of the reporter. This kind of royal power is what would have been more familiar to Pilate and to people in Jesus' day, especially to those who were looking for Jesus to be an earthly king to overthrow Rome and restore Jewish rule. To them a king was one with absolute authority. Even though ancient Greece had a form of democracy, a kingdom or empire was the form of government most familiar to people in Jesus' day.

This kind of royal power gives me a different understanding of the disparity between what Pilate would have thought about a king and what Jesus said his kingdom was about. Pilate would likely have had difficulty understanding Jesus' response to him, but we do know that it was enough for him to think that Jesus was not a political threat and not guilty of treason. Jesus was not looking to be a military ruler, violently overthrowing the Roman government.

Jesus' tells Pilate that if his kingdom were of this world – if it were a kingdom that was understood in the way the world understands a kingdom

– that his followers would not have allowed him to be arrested without putting up a fight. But his followers did not fight. Jesus’ kingdom is different from anything that Pilate can comprehend.

Throughout Jesus’ life and ministry, we see the kind of kingdom he was talking about. The world understood being a king as overpowering others rather than empowering them. “Jesus models for us a different way of leading. He engages the outcasts of his society, daring to recognize the presence of God in prostitutes, tax collectors, and widows. He chastises his disciples when they start arguing about which one of them is going to sit on his left and on his right – it’s not about prestige, guys! He heals the sick and welcomes little children. Then he preaches about a kingdom where ‘the last shall be first and the first shall be last.’ Not the kind of thing proclaimed by people in power who are interested in keeping their power.”ⁱⁱ

Jesus’ response to Pilate is that he was born and came into the world to testify to the truth. The next verse which we did not read this morning, is Pilate asking, “What is truth?” It sounds like a question right out of our daily news. “Alternative facts” is now a familiar term. The other day my granddaughter was researching a subject on the Internet and we had a conversation about how to identify a site as reliable and the importance of not believing everything she hears or reads.

Jesus came to “testify to the truth”. Jesus is about uncovering the truth where it has been hidden. Jesus is about “disclosing what the powers-to-be need to conceal in order to be able to subject and exploit men and women... Truth is an event in which actual reality is allowed to come forth out of hiding.” Releasing, uncovering, showing the truth can be dangerous. His kingdom is marked by truth which means that what is godless and false about our lives will not be able to stand.ⁱⁱⁱ

Traditional kings demand allegiance and servitude, but Mark's Jesus is about liberation. Jesus expects his followers to give allegiance and service, - but not servitude. Jesus is about liberation from suffering, from death, from exclusion, persecution and even from our own egos and our selfishness. There is no room for false gods; by definition, there is no one or nothing else more deserving of our praise, attention, or energy.^{iv} We are called to put aside the false gods of money, possessions, power, or whatever else we think is more important than God.

You have heard me say, more than once, that loyalty and commitment to Christ means that it is through the eyes of Christ that we see everything else that is wonderful in our lives. It is through the love of God that we love those most dear to us. It is through the love of God that we love even those we do not know or may not really like, but whom we still love as God's children.

"Christ's kingship is fundamentally at odds with traditional structures of power." As members of Jesus' kingdom, we are called, invited, and commissioned to bring the good news to this world daily. We are called to uncover the truth, share it, and testify to it. Sometimes that may be uncomfortable, and it may be easier to go along with the untruths that are being proclaimed.

We are called to love others with the love that we have known in Christ. We are called to help others and in doing so to help others know God's love through our actions. We do this in both large and small actions. We do this in actions that are both public and private. As a congregation we do this when we adopt a family at Christmas, when we donate to hurricane or fire recovery, when we give money to someone with a special need like the family in the nursery school we have reached out to. We

show and share God's love simply by being present to someone who needs a listening ear, or a friend to walk with them during difficult times.

The fastest growing segment of the population currently is that group that describes their religion as "none". Some have been hurt by organized religion and churches or people in them. Some have only heard words of hate, exclusion, or judgment from those who profess to speak for God. The number of people who have never been inside a church is increasing. There are more and more people who have never really heard about or experienced God's love. For some, we may be the only way they will ever experience or be exposed to God's love.

In a very real way we are the ambassadors of the kingdom of God. We are the ones who will help people know that Jesus' kingdom is about something very different than what many in the world believe. We are the ones who are privileged to share with the world, the mercy, love, peace, and justice of Christ.

Today is the last Sunday in the church year. Next week is the beginning of a new liturgical or church year. The year begins with thinking about Christ's coming. It ends with thinking about Christ as king – the one who is the ruler of our lives, but a ruler who is all about love, mercy, peace, liberation, justice and truth.

We are the ambassadors for this kingdom. We are the ones to share this with the world – both near and far. We are those who testify to the truth. In a world where there is constant conflict and uncertainty, the reading from Revelation comes to us with a word of assurance. Jesus tried to explain to Pilate that his kingdom was not like earthly kingdoms, but the world could not hear or understand and Jesus was put to death.

However, even then, the world had not won. Revelation witnesses to the one “who is, and who was and who is to come”. Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega – the beginning and the end. He is the truth that is spelled out by the entire alphabet of divine meaning.

“Revelation is thought to have been composed when the early Christian community suffered heavy persecution from the Romans, it encourages the community to remain faithful. It can do so because the very fact of Jesus answers the big questions, the beginning and the end.” This means that the middle, in which we live, loses its ability to intimidate no matter how difficult, confusing, or frustrating it may seem. The middle loses its ability to intimidate because we know both the beginning and the end of the story. We know that God’s love for humanity is so great that God chose to walk among us. We know that God defeated death and set God’s resurrecting spirit free upon the earth.^v

Kingship for Jesus is the reverse of what Pilate thought it was. Kingship for Jesus is the reverse of what we find in nations where monarchy is absolute. Kingship for Jesus is not about a “hierarchy of privilege, but of right relations for all, justice and mercy, and transformative love that brings new life.” You may remember that earlier in Mark’s gospel, Jesus fled from the crowds because he feared that they would try to make him a traditional king.

Jesus is a “beatitude king”. Jesus is about blessing, empowering, and loving. Christ is the “king of justice, of mercy, of love. In this kingdom, we are not called to follow, but to lead. We can and must all be beatitude kings, especially in the bleakest of times. We must maintain our visions, prophesy hope, and remain faithful and committed to the struggle.”^{vi}

This is true even and especially when we are facing a world where truth is too often debatable and where exclusion and hate often seem to triumph over inclusion and love. When racism is rampant, we can and must be people who witness to the beautiful diversity of God's creation, the equality of all people and the privilege experienced by many of us simply because of the color of our skin.

We are invited to remember that we are the only Bible some people will ever read. We are invited to testify to the truth and to be agents of love wherever we may be.

ⁱ Abingdon Preaching Annual 2018, Nov 25. P.146

ⁱⁱ Barros, Pearl Maria "A Different Kind of King" in Preaching the Word in Sojourners.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wrencher, Brandon. "Out of the Fire" in Preaching the Word in Sojourners.

^{iv} Bruzzese, Michaela. "Christ the King" in Preaching the Word in Sojourners.

^v Bruzzese, Michaela. "Everlasting Dominion" in Preaching the Word in Sojourners.

^{vi} Ibid