

For King and Country

Shepherd's Grace Church

November 25, 2012

John 18: 33-38

33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters* again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' 34 Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' 35 Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?' 36 Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.' 37 Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' 38 Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?' (Also Read 2 Sam. 23: 1-7)

This is an odd week in the Christian calendar! We have concluded our study of Mark. We have come to an understanding for this particular year of what Mark is trying to communicate. We are past Thanksgiving! We have finished with all the busyness of family and friends and feeling over fed. The truth is, we are ready for Advent! Well, we are really ready for Christmas, but out of some deference to the Church calendar, I will say Advent! Why can't we just get on with lighting the candles and trimming the tree, and preparing for the play? It should be the Christmas ...Woops...Advent season!

To make that leap however shortchanges our experience as Christians. This week has been all about remembering. Thanksgiving, as much as any other time of the year draws on all our memories, good and difficult; memories of family coming together, memories of food aplenty, memories of the struggles getting family together, the disappointment of some not being there or choosing other places to be, memories of some making incredible sacrifice to be with us! All these memories some so poignant, some so melancholy, some so sharp in their intensity that even now, we are drawn into them! To move from the intensity of this week to the eagerness and anticipation of next without pausing to reflect would be a great disservice to God! It would also diminish God's desire to celebrate with us!

God does not desire that we rush our lives! He invites us to live them! He demands that we be patient in them, waiting, watching, wondering, and dare I say, praying for His presence in them! God longs to be invited in! He does not want to be an afterthought, but rather he wants his rightful place as a forethought! God's plan for us unfolds in the fullness of time.

Therefore, in spite of our eagerness, we gather this morning to celebrate! We may want Christmas, er...Advent, but what we have is today! This is a day the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it! And what day is it? It is the day we celebrate Christ the King! Still another anomaly in the church calendar! Today we talk about a king! Here in the United States, where we threw off kings because of their tyranny and oppressive behavior...here in the 21st century where our talk is all about our liberties, our freedoms, our rights regardless of the rights of others, here...in this place...in this time we are called to celebrate a king! What an incomprehensible contradiction, and yet for those of us who are human,

for those of us with less than perfect comprehension, God often seems like a contradiction. Perhaps then, we should recognize that God, the God of our faith, the God of our trust has once again turned the world upside down so that we might look at his right side up!

In 2Samuel today, we hear King David say that the word of God, the presence of God stays in his mouth. Immediately following Thanksgiving, I am sure there are several things that stay in our mouths. If I mention cranberries, many will remember the tart sweetness of a food we eat only a couple of times a year! I remember not only the flavor, but the sight of my oldest daughter standing at the stove preparing them for us! It has been her role for a number of years now and it is a sight that warms my heart. Just to think about cranberries evokes a strong reaction for me. If I mention pumpkin pie, many will recall the flavor rich with cinnamon and nutmeg. Many will also remember with me, the painstaking care of a mother or grandmother working tirelessly the day before to prepare a crust that will come out just perfect for the family she loves so much.

Taste and smell evoke such strong memories for us it is no wonder the author uses these sensations to describe the presence of God for David. It is remarkable however to remind ourselves that these are some of David's last words. His memory of God's presence would undoubtedly remind him of God's presence when he fought Goliath. He would celebrate that victory in his mind and rejoice that God was with him in that moment. His memory would also include the reminder from Naham the prophet of his great sin with Bethsheba. In that moment of disappointment, David would recall God's great forgiveness. For David, a king, victory and defeat and humility in both would have been a part of the experience of God's presence. Perhaps that is a part of what God wants us to know on this Sunday where we celebrate Christ the King.

David is called the "apple of God's eye," and "one after God's own heart," and yet we know that David is clearly human. What does God see in David that He also wants us to see? I believe it is David's willingness to accept responsibility for all his actions. Regardless of David's situation or circumstance, he accepts the consequence of his actions. He is human and he continually acknowledges his humanity. He also continually gives God credit for the great things that happen to him. The presence of God is with him always. I believe this is the point at which our Hebrew Bible Lesson intersects our Gospel lesson for the day!

The Gospel lesson from John contrasts two kings. They respond very differently to their own circumstances. God invites us to make a choice. Who will we follow? What kind of character will we display? How will we seek to live our lives. The first King, Pontius Pilate, is having a bad day. He has just returned from meeting with the high priests and rulers of the Jews. He has not found anything in their argument worthy of condemning Jesus to die! The elite of Israel would not bend! Pilate sought compromise, but they were unyielding! They were demanding that Jesus be put to death!

Pilate returns to headquarters and summons Jesus! "Are you a king," he asks. If Jesus answers in the affirmative, he is guilty of insurrection. That would make Pilate's day. Jesus, however, continues Pilate's convulsion. He teases Pilate with a non-answer. At this point, Pilate reveals his true color. He takes no

responsibility for his actions. He blames the elite of Israel for bringing Jesus and does not have the courage to stand up to them even though he has the power to let Jesus go.

Earlier this week, Kenton had his first basketball game. In the game, Kenton got caught in a turnover where one of his teammates led him to a play where he was forced to commit a foul. Later in the game, he was preparing to take a charge, got confused and turned his back to the charging player. Kenton was called for the foul. Kenton ended the game with 4 fouls, 6 turnovers, and only two points. Needless to say, it was not his most stellar game! After the game, I waited up for him to come home. Rochelle was already upstairs in bed. As Kenton entered the door, I was prepared for him to blame his teammates, the refs, slick floors or anything else possible for the poor performance he had. Instead, the first words out of his mouth were, "I really stunk tonight!" He accepted full responsibility for his play and recognized that all that had happened was of his own doing! I could not have been more proud of him!

I suspect that God may have felt that same way when David, confronted by his own sin, accepted responsibility and the consequences that went with it. Contrast that with Pilate's actions. This person runs from responsibility. He has the power, but recognizes it is a precarious power. His power only comes from physical might and military superiority. David's power comes from God! David recognizes that in victory or defeat, God is always present. Pilate believes that he is the source of his own power and that even one defeat so deeply destroys his ego that he will not acknowledge any responsibility on his own part.

In the play, "Jesus Christ Superstar," Pilate blames all others as he says, "this man is not even of my race, he is not my problem. He belongs to Herod." He then tries to diminish Jesus further by talking about how small he is, how insignificant, not a king at all. As we think about Pilate's plight, we recognize again how God has turned the world upside down. The one who is to offer his life is calm and collected, recognizing God is in control. The one who is in control is agitated and angry, frustrated because he is being forced to do something he doesn't really want to do! When we bow to human pressure, we surrender our right to our own identity. Pilate the king proved that this kind of king really has no power! His rule is not authentic!

In his book, "Let Your Life Speak," Parker Palmer argues that we must let our stories define our lives and that we must listen to our stories to determine the authentic action God is calling us to in our lives. When we live our lives in their truest form, we can acknowledge our own failings and shortcomings. We can recognize that the circumstances we find ourselves in offer us an opportunity to grow and deepen our lives in faith, trusting that God will use what is best, what is brightest in us to accomplish His purposes, to allow the coming of His Kingdom!

As a people of Shepherd's Grace, we are called to live this kind of life! We are called to share our love with each other, responding to each joy and concern with a prayerful attitude and a promise of genuine desire for God's grace to be poured out. We are called to recognize in those who come into our midst and uniqueness that is born of the Spirit of God. We are called to put aside the uncomfortable smells they sometimes bring into our presence and instead remember the sweet smell of joy that comes from serving and living our neighbor. Much like the sweet smells of Thanksgiving evoke strong memories of

live and kindness in our families, we are called to remember these same sweet smells as we are invited into the presence of others who are different from us!

Jesus' answer to Pilate in their conversation reveals a reality we are not to forget. He says, "My kingdom is not of this world." We can understand from this that Jesus is not about the worldly power that Pilate and elite of Israel aspire to. His kingdom is not about the pursuit of wealth and power, but about the pursuit of justice and love! The Kingdom of God is not of this world, it is not of this nation, it is not of this state. We must forever remind ourselves that God's work is not only for us in our privilege, but is for others who live in different worlds, in different states! In John 4, Jesus says, I have those that you do not know about.

What Jesus wants us to know is that his kingdom is not just to those who choose to know him now, but is in anticipation of those who will know him in the future! Those who are drug users often live in a different world. Those of us who are not addicts cannot understand this world. We cannot understand what it is to be driven above family and friends, above work and relationships, above health and home to pursue an immediate pleasure and escape from this world into a world where there is some relief from stress and pressure they just cannot cope with in this one.

Those who are addicted to alcohol find themselves frequently trying to exist in this world while seeking escape into a world where their pain can be put aside for awhile. Many of these who live in another world bring their world next to ours and sometimes even mix it with ours in order to try to cope in this world. Just last week, I assisted a functional alcoholic who was helping someone move into a new home. This person was persistently going to the car to sneak a drink but remained functional for the move. Jesus says his Kingdom exists in another world!

Those who hide in fear every night as they go to bed escape to another world, hoping their father or grandfather or brother or mother will not come down the hall to abuse them that night. They hope and pray that tonight will be a night of reprieve and when it is not, they escape into another world in their mind so the abuse is not quite so oppressive.

Those who come home from war and conflict having seen terrors so heinous that no one should have to witness them, often escape to another world where they can forget the pain and trauma of what they have witnessed. The post traumatic stress they suffer plagues them and drives them into a world of their own imagination that allows them to continue to exist!

These are just a few of the other worlds where the Kingdom of God does exist. Jesus wants us to know that regardless of who we are or what we have experienced, His Kingdom exists in that world for us. Jesus is God of addicts, of the abused, of the conflicted. His kingdom is of these worlds as well as of the world where our faith is so frequently put on trial!

Pilate was put out at the elite of Israel because the man called Jesus was causing the "regular" people to believe in him! They were demonstrating a faith in his teaching and in Jesus Himself! This was a threat to the power in place that was held by the elite! They were not willing to give up that power. They did not want Jesus as a part of their world. Pilate also wants to keep his power. He does not want this

precarious alliance disrupted, but he does have some conscience. He does not want to take the life of an innocent man.

When Jesus responds with claims of another Kingdom, Pilate sees his opportunity. He thinks maybe he can yet pin t his claim of kingship on Jesus. Jesus however, throws him another curve. He says, in the words of an old spiritual song, "I'm just a poor wayfaring stranger, traveling through this world of woe, but there's no sickness, toil or danger in that bright world to which I go." He says, this world is broken and beaten and addicted, and has lost sight of the truth! It is for the truth that he has come into the world, and not for power or this-worldly wealth!

Jesus has come for the truth! Pilate asks, "What is truth?" That is the question we all want to know, and if we have been paying attention to the earlier parts of John's gospel, we already know the answer. Truth is that which is authentic to the original. What is the original? The original is God! For those of us who are believers there can be no denying God as original. There is nothing before God. He is eternal with no beginning or end! He creates out of nothing and his creation is good!

If truth is authentic to the original, then we need to go back to John 1 and remember the words, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God!" In verse 14, the Word becomes flesh and lives among us. The truth is God and God is Jesus and Jesus is standing before Pilate at that very moment! But why has he come!

Not only is Jesus the truth as expressed in John 14.6, but Jesus testifies to the truth! It is for this reason that He is born! Truth created the world and John says that without the Word, Truth, not one thing in the world came into being. Humans did not come into being, plants, animals, earth and seas, all these things did not come into being without him. And John 3: 18 says that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever shall believe in him shall not perish! That is the truth that he came to bring.

He came to bring this truth to the addict, to the abused, to the conflicted and to all of us! God loves even us enough to be the truth for us, to redeem us from death and decay and to redeem us in his sight so that we might live in his presence forever. Kings in this world often seek power for their own sake, for their own wealth. The King of Glory comes not to gain wealth, but to redeem us so that we might have life and have it abundantly, so that we might gain wealth not in this world, but in God's Kingdom where all live together in peace and harmony!

On this Sunday of Christ the King we remember Thanksgiving! The tastes are still in our mouth! But we also remember thanksgiving! Charles Jennings reminded us on Tuesday evening at our community worship service of all we have to be thankful for and the greatest thing for which we give thanks is our life! In our life we can love! In our life we can share! In our life we can serve! In our life we can think! In our life we can thank! In our life we can praise!

All these things we do because Christ is King! It is to Him we owe our allegiance! It is to him that we give all glory, honor and praise! We may bristle at the thought of a king because our experience is more with the kingdoms of Pontius Pilate, but we can rejoice at the kingdom of Christ because his kingdom is

not of this world, but of a world where all people find peace, where the addicts and the abused are as welcome as the saints! In this world we can serve, we can give thanks, and we can rejoice as we all give allegiance to Christ! In Christ, we have a new King and country!

Amen!

Next Week: Scripture: Luke 21: 25-36. Message: *Peace Through the Eyes of God.* This week we begin the season of Advent. It is a time of preparation, a time of prayer. We long for Messiah, but the time is both already and not yet! How will we experience Messiah? What does God see in the world that tells Him, "Now is the Time?" What does Advent look like "through the Eyes of God?" Come and Worship. Come and See!

Love, Hope, Peace, and Joy are the words we celebrate on Sundays during Advent. We wait, watch, and wonder at what God is about to do as we eagerly look forward to the coming of the Christ! What is God waiting, watching, wondering about as He prepares? Look for daily devotionals on Facebook and on this website as we consider, "*Advent Through the Eyes of God!*"

Each day we will take a very short look at scripture, thought and prayer that focuses on God's plan for our Christmas preparations. These devotionals will begin Monday December 3, 2012.