

“You Can’t Handle the Truth”

Psalm 93

John 18: 33-38a

Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday

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Those of you who know me well know that I love the holiday season. Like retailers who take the bags of Halloween candy off the shelves only to replace them immediately on November 1 with red and green M&Ms and candy canes, I am always chomping at the bit to start the holiday season. In an almost cliché, sentimental way I love everything about it: the music, the lights downtown by the train tracks, the eggnog lattes at Starbucks, the holiday specials on tv—I love it all. If it wasn’t for the fact that we have a live tree in our house, we probably would have gotten one this last weekend and put it up already, but for fear that it would die before Christmas Day we will wait a couple more weeks. In fact, if you look carefully around the church this Sunday you will notice that, tucked away in the hallways and in the closets, are Christmas decorations have been taken out of long term storage and they’ve been staged like marathon runners at a starting line, just waiting for the gun to go off on Thanksgiving Eve so they can be rushed into the Sanctuary.

There’s a sense of eager anticipation about launching into the holiday, such that, Christ the King Sunday might seem like just an obligatory milestone to be passed on the way to the good stuff. And yet, if we are going to embrace the Advent and Christmas season, if we are going to spend weeks of anticipation, waiting for this Christ child to come so that we can gather again

on Christmas Eve, rise and sing, “Joy to the world, the Lord is come, let earth receive her king,” how can we do so unless we have some sense of what kind of king it is we are about to receive? What kind of kingdom is about to be ushered in, what will be expected of us as citizens who pledge allegiance to that kingdom? What is it all about?

Maybe, Christ the King Sunday is worth paying a little bit attention to. It’s not an ancient holiday like Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost; holidays that came out of those first centuries of the early church. The specific designation of Christ the King Sunday as the last Sunday of the church year, was made in 1925 by Pope Pius the Eleventh. In the mid 1920’s the global economy was not doing well, there were rising tides of nationalism and fascism that threatened unrest. Seeds of evil were already being planted—seeds that would eventually lead to the holocaust and World War II. Pope Pius the Eleventh thought this would be an appropriate time to remind Christians everywhere that it is Christ who is our king. No earthly ruler, no earthly mandates or decrees; ultimately reign over us.

In trying to figure out what it really means to welcome this king and this kingdom, and in trying to answer Pilate’s question, “What is truth,” from our scripture lesson this morning, there might be some intersections for us. If you notice in the Gospel of John, Pilate’s question is left hanging. The scene immediately changes in the gospel story as if the gospel writer wants that questions to linger for a while. If they had asked me to write the gospel, I probably would have written a quick retort from Jesus. Something along the

lines of a reprise of Jack Nicholson's line from *A Few Good Men*, firing back to Pilate: "You Can't Handle the Truth!" But they didn't ask me to write the gospel. So the questions linger. What is truth? What kind of king and kingdom are we about to welcome once again?

This morning I thought that a few little props might help us consider what kind of kingdom this king will reign over. In the ancient near east, purple robes were garments worn by royalty. In part we think this is because the dyes that were used to make purple fabric were very rare and very expensive, so wearing purple was a sign of status. It was a way of saying, "look at me, I'm better than you. I am affluent. I have power and influence." It was a way of setting oneself apart, a way of making sure everyone knew who you were and how to treat you. Being the king of the kingdom was about looking good. Jesus, as far as we know, never wore a purple robe.

Instead, just a little earlier in the gospel of John, Jesus stands up in the thirteenth chapter at dinner with his disciples and he wraps a simple towel around his waist. He begins to wash their feet. Peter says, "Lord, you will never wash my feet." Jesus says, "Peter, if I don't you will never have a share with me." Peter repents saying, "Then wash all of me, wash my head, my feet, everything." For Jesus was modeling a different kind of king and kingdom to the disciples—the truth that in this kingdom, kings will be servants. It's not a kingdom of looking good; it's a kingdom of *doing* good; serving one another in the name of Christ.

Kings also had a scepter. This scepter may look suspiciously like a curtain rod from Bed Bath & Beyond, but I assure you it is a royal king's scepter. A scepter was a tool in the hand of a powerful king. It was a tool that was used to make decrees and laws, to keep people under his thumb. It was a tool in the hand of a powerful king to command armies, to trample on people who disagreed with the king, or who got in the king's way. It was symbol of leadership through fear and domination. Although, in our opening hymn we sing about Jesus with a scepter in the heavenly kingdom, we don't think Jesus ever carried a scepter. Instead, the gospel of John gives us the image of Jesus as a shepherd who carries not a scepter but a crook; a shepherd who lovingly cares for his sheep. John tells us that the sheep will know the sound of our savior's voice, of the king's voice. This is not a king who commands or who leads through fear and domination. This is a king who leads through love, through gentleness, through intimacy. This is a king whose voice we recognize, not a voice we fear, but one that we long to hear, one that comforts us and strengthens us for the journey ahead.

Kings wore crowns; a head dress of gold and precious stones. A crown was passed on from one human being to the next. It was a sign that this kingship was an exclusive privilege passed down through family, or sometimes through military coup or military domination. The kings wore crowns as a sign that their life was privileged and intentionally separated from the everyday experience of the common people. Kings, living high on a hill in a castle, were detached from everyone else.

Jesus never wore a crown like this. Ironically, the only crown he ever wore was one that was forced on him, to mock him. It was a crown of thorns; making fun of his claim, or the claim that others had of him, as the King of the Jews. Yet, it is a reminder to us that our king is one who has known our grief and born our sorrows, who has walked the paths of our lives. This is not a king who is detached and privileged somewhere far away, but a king who knows exactly how we feel in every valley. This is a king who accompanies us through broken hearts and broken dreams, with glimmers of light and hope.

Finally, the symbol of a throne: the place where a king would sit. Thrones were heavy, they were meant to last a long time. It was a symbol of permanence, a symbol of status quo; it was a symbol of clinging onto power in a traditional, old fashioned kind of way. Jesus never sat in a throne like this, instead, Jesus, was on a cross. Instead of a throne, we claim the symbol of an empty cross. We know that Jesus died and rose again; that Jesus reigns and prays for us even now. It is a reminder to us that we don't have to worry about the old life, the status quo anymore, that Jesus offers us new life. "I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly," Jesus says. Every week when we gather to worship, we can confess our sins before one another and before God with confidence knowing that we serve a King who always extends forgiveness. We have a king who accompanies us and offers us not just consolation, not just an understanding empathetic ear, but a king who truly has the power to offer to us new life.

Is suspect that there are people still, perhaps people in this community, who continue to ask the question that Pilate asked. “What is truth? What is true? What kind of king is this that you are going to serve? “To what kind of kingdom do you pledge allegiance?” Biblical scholars tell us that the Gospel of John overall tries to make the point that there is a deep and important connection between belief and practice. It is not enough to be able to articulate one’s faith; one must put it into practice, into action every day. The ancient way of saying it’s not enough to talk the talk; you have to walk the walk.

As we begin to answer the question, “What is truth,” for ourselves, for our church and community, the answer will not simply be found in being able to articulate a set of beliefs. It will be found in the practices of our daily lives. Will we be part of a kingdom, will we follow a king who models for us these truths? The truth is that the kingdom is about service; the kingdom is about leading through love and intimacy; the kingdom is about accompanying one another and knowing that God accompanies us through every journey of life. The truth is that there is no where we can go to escape the love of God. Not only does God accompany us, but we believe in a God who frees us, who forgives us, who offers to us new life today and every day. Alleluia. Amen