



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Belong to the Truth

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This week we turn the page on the liturgical calendar and begin a new church year with the season of Advent, preparing for the baby Jesus. As the seasons unfold from Advent into Christmas, Epiphany and those that follow, we read and preach about his presence among us.

So, if next Sunday marks a new year, this Sunday logically stands as the culmination of a year of proclaiming who Jesus is and why he lives.

Today is known as the Reign of Christ. What kind of king is Jesus? What does it mean to live under his kingship?

Wouldn't it also be logical to imagine that the prescribed lectionary reading for today would celebrate victory? Perhaps the breakfast on the beach Jesus shared after the resurrection with Peter and his disciples? Or that walk along the Emmaus Road when he unfolded the scriptures? Or Thomas' doubt turning to faith upon seeing the risen Christ and saying, "my lord, my God"?

Those seem logical. Yes, that was a set up.

Today's reading plunges us into the ugly. We read of Jesus' pivotal encounter with a political leader before he is crucified.

Walk with me, quickly, through John's gospel. It opens with not a birth narrative, but by placing Jesus with God at the beginning of all time, stating through him "grace and truth came into being."

Jesus' ministry upsets the status quo with his teaching and healing. When confronted by the religious leaders who sought to hold him captive to their purposes, Jesus refuses, "know the truth and the truth will set you free (John 8)." On the night of the Last Supper, he promises "I am the way the truth and the life" (John 14). Now we reach the climactic tension between a tortured and wounded Jesus and the Roman ruler, Pilate. On trial for his life and ours, we meet our king.

Before I read, please pray with me.

God our king, our leader in life, and savior to life eternal. Quiet in us any voice but yours. Fill these ancient words with your spirit that in hearing, we draw close to your son, we feel his courage, and we become startled by his truth. Amen.

John 18:33-38

³³ Then Pilate entered the headquarters, 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. 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?”

Some will contend that the “Reign of Christ” seems manufactured as a milestone in our Christian calendar. It is. After the catastrophic loss of human life during the Great War and as nationalist ideals festered in Europe, monarchs fell, communism rose, and battles ensued to capture control of governments, in 1925 Pope Pius called the church to belong to Christ.

He added the Reign of Christ into what had been a centuries’ old, tightly locked, liturgical calendar to unite Catholics regardless of ethnicity or homeland; they to belong first and foremost to Christ.

This truth resonated for other Christians. Protestant denominations readily embraced the readings and theological focus.

Looking back at almost one hundred years ago, it seems a miracle to me that a Catholic pope would wield such influence. At that time, not only were denominations deeply divided, Protestants and Catholics, Methodists and Presbyterians, even within denominations people fought

over prepositions and punctuation in catechisms and faith statements.

At a time when everyone attempted to claim that they had cornered the truth, the call for unity ignited the imaginations of believers to devote their lives to Jesus' reign as the king of truth and grace.

Unfortunately, in the face of this fledgling quest to unite believers, another war followed. The Nazi's promised to restore a defeated people through their unique superiority. When people collect together, the love of power becomes lethal. Again, people died to prop up a brutal regime as others gave their lives fighting to preserve freedom.

We repeat these confrontations over and over...Nazi ideals did not die with Hitler.

Annually, neo-Nazis gathered in the German town of Wunsiedel to pay tribute to Hitler's deputy, Rudolph Hess, who had been buried in the town, and broadcast their right-wing, extremist ideals.

In mid-November 2014 the town residents decided to turn the tables on their annual pilgrimage. Rather than watch from a distance, cover their ears from the hate, they banded together to welcome the demonstrators. Unknown to the neo-Nazis, for every meter they walked, merchants and residents donated ten Euro to an organization that fought

extremism by freeing those held captive to such brainwashing ideologies.

When the 200 demonstrators reached the town and saw the celebration, they faced a choice, admit defeat, retreat from the town and their purpose.

Or continue forward and accept the messages of love from the townspeople who pleaded with them to turn from hate. They marched knowing full well that their actions would raise funds for an organization committed to their downfall.¹ The equivalent of over \$12,000 was raised.

Wit. Love. Courage. This town imagined and acted. They modeled to others how to not ignore such destructive ideals, merely hoping the hate away, and instead met it with compassion. Their story inspired residents in Charlottesville following the riots in 2017 to respond with love and not add more fuel to the fires of racism.

Let's return to John's gospel and see how Jesus' kingdom comes into focus.

When Jesus performed the feeding miracle, turning scant bread and fish into a feast, something the government failed to even consider, the crowd tried to make him a king. Jesus fled.

¹ <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/08/21/german-town-tricks-neo-nazis-into-fundraising-for-anti-extremist-org.html>

Time and again, those who followed him witnessed his signs, believed he possessed power to change their lives, but within a limited understanding sought to elevate him over other rulers. Throngs greeted Jesus on his final entry into Jerusalem, laying palm branches at his donkey's feet and hailed him "King of Israel," a role exclusive to Roman rulers. Unwilling to serve according to their definition of king, those crowds receded as quickly as they gathered. Days later, betrayed by Judas and denied by Peter, Jesus peacefully surrenders himself to the Roman authorities.

A violent end to Jesus' life has been in the making from the earliest days. Each time his ministry ran afoul of the "powers that be," startling people to ask his intent, Jesus spoke of being lifted up. He turned them to look forward to his moment when grace and truth would overrule the worst humankind can inflict.

Only now that he is bound in ropes, vulnerable, Jesus accepts the title of king. When he replies to Pilate, "my kingdom is not from here," he confounds a man used to measuring and defending borders with soldiers.

Jesus might be saying, if he and his followers were only of this world, then naturally they would use the primary tool for establishing and keeping power: violence. But Jesus is not of this world and so Jesus will not defend himself through violence. Jesus will make no followers by violence. He never did and certainly could not now that he is bound and alone.

Still confused about Jesus' kingdom, Pilate asks, "so you are a king?"

Now Jesus' defines his kingdom in terms of God's purpose. He answers: "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."

You have to wonder, after hearing Jesus speak, how long Pilate waited. Was it an immediate reaction or thoughtful listening that prompted perhaps the most famous question in all of the New Testament: "what is the truth?"

We'll never know if he asks out of contempt or curiosity, hunger or anger. Or fear, longing, or desperation. But it doesn't matter; Jesus doesn't respond. That is, he doesn't respond with words. He doesn't engage Pilate in dialogue. Instead, he stands there.

His silence implies: "You're looking at it. I am the truth. I am the one who stands with those in your dungeon. I am the one who cares for the hungry and the homeless. I am the prisoner of war. I am the one who will take the bullet for the innocent and the sinner. I will even stand for you."

In other words, truth isn't an instrument, a weapon, or a slogan we can smack on a wall. The truth is Jesus. The life of Jesus, the way of Jesus, the love of Jesus. To be a part of his kingdom calls us to live in honor of his higher and eternal truth: love of God and love of neighbor.

Let me close with a story about the struggles for power in our backyard.

Earlier this month, an interfaith clergy group formed over the summer met at Westminster. Our conversations vary from how to lead COVID to the challenges within the south hills. Racism. LGBTQ rights. Mental health. Anxiety. None of us have time for one more meeting, so this group quickly arrived at a place of safety, candor, and relevance. Otherwise, we would have fallen apart.

This month, despair laced our conversation. That morning, Rabbi Aaron Meyers of Temple Emmanuel had received another email from the principle at a middle school in Mt. Lebanon. Another swastika found in a boys' bathroom. Aaron did not recall the timing of the first two incidents during the fall, but the third swastika was discovered on the anniversary of the Tree of Life violence.

That day, the count was up to five.

One priest lamented that he feels as if he is preaching to the choir when he speaks of the dangers of hate. We wondered if a joint statement from the clergy would matter. Do we wait for the tenth incident? How many is one too many?

On Friday, I texted Aaron to learn if there had been any more instances. He immediately replied, "I don't mean to be melodramatic over here, but I have lost count. A couple

more on a desk last week, and one more in the bathroom yesterday.”

If we remain silent, doesn't that embolden someone or ones to go from sneaking symbols onto walls to speaking of hate, to shouting with crowds, and then slipping into violence? Maybe inspiring more to join in the parade to claim their version of a corrupted truth?

The reign of Christ calls us to stand as Jesus and stare down those who seek to perpetuate hate. The reign of Christ demands we profess our fidelity to him before and above any other claim on our hearts and minds, before partisan politics, social groups, even our families.

The reign of Christ calls for bravery, so our children are not terrorized or grow to think this is acceptable and reach for their own weapons. It also calls for us to denounce what transpires on the national stage with political leaders and law makers when they incite hate. The gospel does not hide from ugly, nor can we.

Today we celebrated the baptism of tender new life into our world and promised to live in ways that honor the gospel. We remember that our baptism sinks us into the saving waters. We emerge to live as a part of this vulnerable king's life. This is the unity we share in life and into life eternal with Jesus. In him, we belong to the truth.



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