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John 18:33-37

What Kind of King?

Rev. Kerry Smith

Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

John 18:33-37 (New Revised Standard Version)

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” 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?” 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.” 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.”

Prayer: O Lord, we pray, speak in this place, in the calming of our minds and the longing of our hearts, by the words of my lips and in the meditations of our hearts.  Speak, O Lord, for your servants listen.  Amen.

You might not recognize me.  I mean you really only hear about me once a year.  During Lent around Good Friday, I know what you hear about me.  I killed Jesus.  Well, I am Pilate, but I offered to the crowd to release Jesus.  I said to them, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?”  It was the crowd that shouted to release Barabbas even though he was a bandit.  I tried to let Jesus go.

Now right about this time you might be wondering why I am here.  You might be thinking to yourself, it is almost Advent, why is Pilate here now?  I mean you all haven’t even celebrated Jesus being born yet, why am I am here to remind you that the little baby will be killed?  Well, you might have noticed all of the majestic hymns that you have sung.  You might have even noticed what today is.  It is Christ the King Sunday.  They asked me to come and speak to you today because I was the one charged with deciding whether Jesus was the King.  If I had decided to let him go, he wouldn’t have been the King.  You might say that I’m arrogant or conceited, but it was all me, I made him the King.  It was all me.  Because I put him to death for being the King, you can celebrate today that Jesus is the King and also move on to Christmas to celebrate the birth of the King.  Christ the King Sunday is the last Sunday of your Christian year.  You sing songs about Jesus, the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords.  You hold him up as the one anointed by your God, to be the Messiah, the King of the Jews, the one chosen by God to be the deliverer and the savior of the world.  Jesus the King.

Well, let me tell you about being a king.  In my day being a king really meant something.  A king was the most powerful human being on earth.  A king spoke and common people trembled.  A king was the only means of securing order and peace.  The king was civilization and national peace personified in one person.  A king was honored and respected and served.  A king was to be revered and feared and obeyed.  A king was of utmost importance, so much so that time itself was calculated on the basis of when the King began his reign.  “In the fifth year of the reign of Julius Caesar” and “In the twenty-fifth year of the reign of King David.”  And today, “In the year of our Lord, two thousand and fourteen.”

That conversation that we just read about between Jesus and me, I remember that conversation like it was yesterday.  I remember them bringing Jesus to me and I asked, “What accusation do you bring against this man?”  They answered me rather strangely and didn’t answer my question; they said, “If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.”  I told them to take this man Jesus and judge him according to their own law, but they said that they were not permitted to put anyone to death.

I remember talking to my wife about what a hard decision it was whether or not to put Jesus to death.  Maybe I should have released Jesus, but I was worried I would lose my job and I had three children to feed.  Some have criticized me for my decision and blamed me.  What else could I do?  As a Roman, I had to honor Caesar and follow the law.

You know, I had heard about Jesus.  I had heard about all of those things that he had said, “I am the good shepherd,” “I am the true vine,” “I am the gate,” “I am the bread of life,” “I am the light of the world,” “I am the resurrection and the life.”  Though I must say that I think the one that put Jesus in trouble was when he said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”  But Jesus never said, “I am a King.”  Even when I asked him if he was “the King of the Jews,” he did not answer the question.  This Jesus never took on the name of King.  I even asked him again if he was a king and again he did not answer me.  He said, “You say that I am a king.”  Then he said that he was born and came into the world “to testify to the truth.”  He never answered me, really.  This Jesus that you talk about is a lamb that sits on a throne?  That does not make any sense.

I know how you treat kings nowadays.  There is no respect, there is no honor, there is no reverence for those who rule over you in the political realm.  Today, royalty have been reduced to the status of your soap opera stars and politicians are almost universally regarded as corrupt and uncaring and out of touch.  When you talk about Jesus the King, do you really know what it means?  Is it a fantasy image, an image that belongs to stories that begin with the words, “Once upon a time, in a land far, far away...”

I, Pontius Pilate, wonder what it means for Jesus to be King.  I have served the most powerful king in the world, and I know what a king is.  I know about the power that a King has, the authority that he wields, the unquestioning obedience that he demands, and the power that he has to compel obedience if it is not volunteered.

My job was one of making and enforcing the rules, and I know what the consequences of ignoring or ridiculing the rules are.  It was my job to enforce the rule that anyone who claimed to be a king, anyone who dared to set themselves up as an authority over and against the lawful authority of Caesar, was to be executed.  That was my job and my responsibility.  When your Jesus was brought before me and the charge that was laid against him was that he unlawfully claimed to be the Messiah, the King of the Jews, the punishment was clear.  But this bruised and troubled man that stood before me, a King?  Ridiculous!  I knew what Kings acted like and I knew what they looked like.  But I asked him anyway if the charges against him were true.  Jesus said that his kingdom is not of this world, and then he says: “If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish authorities.”  I understood that, after all, I knew what a King was.  There was simply no case against Jesus, but more than that, I could not image Jesus as a King, and the image that I had of a King didn’t fit Jesus.  In the end I allowed Jesus to be crucified with the words “King of the Jews” posted over his head in three different languages.  The chief priests wanted me to change the words to, “This man said, I am King of the Jews,” but I insisted that the inscription could not be removed or changed.  It remained, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.”

What kind of a King was your Jesus?  He served others, by forgiving others, by healing others, by giving to others, by sacrificing himself for others.  He talked about his power being the power of truth, the power of faith, the power of hope, the power of love – the power of life itself.  Jesus is a King that calls you to obedience, to faith, and to love here and now, but he does not force or compel you?  A kingdom with voluntary subjects?  He calls on you to allow God to enter into your lives and to rule your lives.  And he shows you in his own person and in the lives of those who follow him that when we turn to him that there is healing and wholeness to be found.  A King who teaches you to love your neighbor?  A King who teachers who to obey God?  A King who rules and guides not from above, but is one of you?  Jesus your King strengthens and sustains.  He forgives sinners.  He blesses the young.  He cares for the aged and for all who have died.  He supplies strength for the weak.  This is your King.

When Jesus answered me that his kingdom was not from this world, I wondered if he meant that he was in charge but not in the way of the world -- not with force and violence -- but with love and with life?  Jesus’ reign is from God.  Was it because of the faithfulness of God to him that he was able to vanquish death and bring healing and peace to all who follow him?

Your King stood before me, Pilate, and refused the title of King.  This is your Savior whose throne will not be of gold and purple, but of the wood of the cross and blood red.  His royal crown will be one of thorns.  A king who was Mary’s boy, who fed the hungry and plead for the orphan and widow.  Mary’s boy who gave you himself that you might share his royal flesh and blood.  This King of Kings, this boy of Mary, this is a King that turns the world on its head.

Well, go ahead and celebrate Jesus Christ your King.  Joy to the world after all.  The Lord is come, let earth receive her king.  Will it really make a difference?  It won’t for me.  I’m already gone.  It will have to be you that makes the difference.  It will have to be you that talks about this King that you have.  It seems to me, a humble outside observer, that it’s one thing to claim Jesus as your Savior, it’s quite another to make him Lord of your life.  Is he your King?  Is he your King?

Lord God Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, we your people praise you, we exalt you, and we bless your holy name.  It is your love that is revealed in the life and death of Jesus, it is your power that is seen in his resurrection; and it is your majesty that is made known by his ascension into heaven to be at your side.  Help us, O God, to always keep your power and your authority and your love and your majesty in our minds and to never neglect the doing of your will.  Help us to be obedient to the word you place in our hearts and minds.  Amen.