

III SAMUEL 23:1-7

Now these are the last words of David: The oracle of David, son of Jesse, the oracle of the man whom God exalted, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the favorite of the Strong One of Israel:

The spirit of the Lord speaks through me, his word is upon my tongue. The God of Israel has spoken, the Rock of Israel has said to me: One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God, is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.

Is not my house like this with God? For he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure. Will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire? But the godless are all like thorns that are thrown away; for they cannot be picked up with the hand; to touch them one uses an iron bar or the shaft of a spear. And they are entirely consumed in fire on the spot.

JOHN 18:33-37

Pilate entered the headquarters, 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 answered, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What do you want?" 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." And Pilate asked, "What is truth?"

CHRIST THE KING SUNDAY

WHO'S IN CHARGE?

II Samuel 17:1-7
John 18:33-37

Who *is* in charge? What a great question for our times—and a very important question for we who embrace the Christian faith. When you observe the global landscape, we see any number of competitors for that role. China is aggressively taking control of international waterways important to the Philippines, Japan and South Korea. North Korea continues to develop its nuclear program in spite of its agreement to cease and desist. Russian would love to repatriate its former nation states while we are more and more pursuing a go-it-alone strategy, distancing ourselves from traditional allies. And let's not even talk about the Middle East. So who *is* in charge? is a very important question in a world where global forces are moving in unpredictable and dangerous ways and seem to have no moral rudder beneath them. There is not a singular point of emphasis the nations can coalesce around that affect the health and well-being of everyone. There can be no longer be any rational debate about the changes in our climate—and not for the better—which has only dire and more dire implications for all of us, the severity of which depends upon where we live. At this rate of warming, climatologists warn that island nations such as the Maldives and Mauritius are literally facing extinction. There are also native communities in Alaska who have been seeing their habitable land disappear into the sea, not by inches, but by a hundred yards each year threatening their populations with relocation and destroying their way of life. And Louisiana's wetlands are being swallowed by rising sea levels at an alarming rate. We have watched with horror the wild fires in California and the flooding earlier this year in the Carolinas, but so far all we are dealing with is an excessive amount of rainfall.

It is way too late to say that any human is in charge of altering those realities, but it lends itself to an apocalyptic anxiety that if we are not experiencing, we should be feeling about our

own situations which we can deny for the time being only because what is coming is not yet imminent. How long will our luck hold out?

Welcome to Christ the King Sunday to which Presbyterians frequently pay little attention, myself included, but which nevertheless does have a compelling message, particularly in these turbulent times when the chasms between people and the failure of our political leaders to unite our populations around policies that address our national and global problems. Today is a symbolically powerful Sunday as well since it is the final sabbath in the liturgical year. Before we begin anew with Advent next week, it is worth our while to remind ourselves that the spiritual Presence in the universe transcends the secular struggles for control to which we are subjected on a daily basis. And as such, it confronts us with a decision about whom we shall subscribe our loyalty to. To which king shall we pay our allegiance?

The origin of Christ the King Sunday dates back to 1925 when it was instituted by Pope Pius XI in the wake of the human and political disaster of World War I. Pius understood that war as a moral and theological crisis as much as a political one. So he designated the day as an opportunity to address the disillusionment of the post war era and the fragility of world peace following the armistice. While there is always jubilation by the triumphant when victory in any war is declared, it is underlaid by grief and emptiness as the loss of life, the destruction of property and the unutterable amount of human suffering rises to center stage. As the dust clears, the inevitable questions of what was the purpose of all this; what did it solve; and where do we go from here? demand to be answered.

Pius's response to these questions was to remind Christians that happiness and fulfillment are not to be found in worldly politics and violence, but rather in God who transcends national borders and ideologies. God is the only sovereign and the way we to genuine peace is the subjugation of our hearts and minds to Divine control. But God cannot be in charge if we subscribe our allegiance to secular ideologies because we have given in to our fear of what will happen if we don't. We are very vulnerable to this occurrence if we lose our spiritual center in

the chaos of current events. There will always be that push and pull between the spiritual and the secular. As long as we are human with very real physical needs and wants, we must continuously negotiate between our ego demands over against the truths above and beyond our individual desires. Who is in charge?

And let us make a distinction between being in charge and having power. All of the aforementioned global leaders have enormous power. But does that mean they're in charge? Let me illustrate the difference. My wife and I have begun grand parenting one per week for little Geordie who is now four months old. Geordie is very powerful because he commands continuous attention. He has a very active twitter feed! But does this mean he is in charge? For his sake, I hope not!

When Jesus is interrogated by Pilate, his life is on the line, and who is in charge is very much the central concern of the investigation. Like any good prosecutor, Pilate is trying to get at the facts. The Jewish authorities want him to convict Jesus on the charge of insurrection for challenging Roman rule in the province. The only way Jesus could do that was to declare himself a king and instigate an armed revolution. This was laughable, of course, but the Romans were paranoid, interested in stability and wishing to squash any sort of Jewish uprising in its tracks. So Pilate asks, "*Are you the King of the Jews?...Why have the chief priests handed you over to me? What have you done?*"

Jesus' reply is on point: "*My kingdom is not from this world....My kingdom is not from here.*" Jesus does not deny his kingship, but it is important to note that he says, "*My kingdom is neither **of** this world nor **from** this world.*" He is talking about its derivation, not its earthly boundaries nor territory. This is an extremely important distinction because it speaks to the spiritual transcending the nationalistic, cultural, political, racial or any other subjective identifier. What he is telling Pilate is that the Roman government has nothing to fear from him: "*My kingdom is not from here.*" He is not challenging the emperor's throne.

Not surprisingly, Jesus' words confuse Pilate, so he seeks clarity. "*So you are a king?*"

Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king and 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."

And there it is—delivered like a package from Amazon right on our front steps. Who are we listening to? Who is going to be in charge of our lives? I am not so sure that our times are so different from those following World War I. There is so much disillusionment and dissatisfaction with the way our world is working—or not working. Where is the fairness? Why do the citizens of the southern Cameroon being terrorized and fleeing from their homes? Why have millions Syrians endured their cities being bombed to rubble and now displaced to refugee camps? Why is there a caravan of mostly young families heading to our southern border because they can not live safely nor prosperously in their own countries? And why do we live in a largely secure nation with freedom and enormous economic opportunities? What did we do to merit these advantages? How is this fair? I can't answer these questions, but I can affirm that there is a truth that transcends these troubling issues—and that truth is` there is one Lord of the universe and that Lord has commanded us to love one another. And the world is crying out for leaders who can fill the moral vacuum that has set us on edge against each other. As King David said on his death bed: *One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God, is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.* Beautiful!

Name one of our world leaders who fit that description. The folks in Washington seem more intent on hurling verbal spit balls at each other rather than calling us into unity or any sort of communal goodwill. We have so much corruption, listen to so many lies, hang our hopes on so many empty promises and give in to so many unwarranted fears. As Pilate asked Jesus, "*What is truth?*" Do we know anymore? Who can fill the spiritual vacuum? We long for someone to do it.

What I come down to is this: we have to fill the moral vacuum together. We ourselves have to be in charge of speaking truth to power and not tolerate the violence of those who only

wish to serve their own interests. We have to be able to set aside ideologies in favor of *humanitarian* values and clamp down on our impulses of anger and hatred. Because if we are waiting for someone else to be in charge, we are abdicating our own responsibilities. And when we do that, we become the victims of our own negligence.

We have to take up the cause of truth and we cannot plead ignorance. We know what it is. *You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.*

Reverend Thomas Dunlap November 25, 2018