

Belong to the Truth
John 18.33-37
Sunday, November 22, 2015
Christ the King
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott

I did it. No one made me. I walked up the stairs all by myself and opened the closet doors. I alone began the work of undoing the Jenga puzzle that is our storage system. I consciously stood there pulling out the red and green boxes a full week before Thanksgiving. I pushed all my gratitude aside and went past the Indian corn and pilgrim serving platters; instead digging for a dozen very favorite Christmas decorations. I have no one to blame but myself for the steady stream of Christmas music playing on the record player, the iPhone, the car stereo. And I am the one who suggested we watch *Elf*, and the *Santa Clause*, and *Home Alone*.

The American Christmas experience transports us from the world as it is to the world as we want for it to be—cozy, safe, happy, abundant, beautiful; platters of sugar-filled treats that we eat endlessly without gaining weight. We bemoan the encroachment of cultural Christmas into the Thanksgiving season, and I have long dismissed the early decorations and sales as purely economic. And yet...maybe that's not the whole story. If the culture is creeping the Christmas calendar closer and closer to November 1, I no longer think it is as simple as increasing the number of holiday sales in stores. I think we all want to be transported to the world in which we hope to live—perfect dinner parties, well appointed and well attended; healthy children who laugh and play without bickering or whining; homes illumined with twinkle lights that comfort us in the darkness of long, winter nights.

We want the promise that everything is going to be alright. Refugees stranded, wandering, waiting for approval to go somewhere because "home" is no longer an option. Rumors that they're moving in next door. Accusations by government officials that these rejected and wandering families may want to harm us. Violence in our city's streets documented on video and compounding the fear we already know. Laborious presidential debates dividing us into tribes pitted against one another. It's all too much, and it's nothing a little Bing Crosby and egg nog can't help us forget.

As I have thought on these things for a few days, a pop-Christian song (a youth group favorite from the 1990s) has been stuck in my head to the point of becoming a nuisance. Almost twenty years ago I spent the summer working for PASSPORT Camp, and every week in evening worship we listened to a song called "This World" by Caedmon's Call as something of a prayer experience. After hearing that song in rehearsal and in worship every week for ten weeks, the chorus was seared in my memory:

This world has nothing for me
And this world has everything
All that I could want
And nothing that I need

A little Christmas music is harmless. A few sparkly decorations are good fun. But I am keenly aware that I stand in a place of tension between the guiding story my culture offers and the guiding story of sacred texts. That's a lot of pressure to put on a 12" Christmas tree dipped in silver glitter, to be sure. But the whole Christmas picture can be an invitation to stop noticing, stop caring, stop considering how to act and intervene in the crises of our day. This world offers me everything I could ever want, if my wants are the right thing to chase after.

The song implies the wants met by this world are distractions and illusions that become more than harmless, good fun.

This world is making me drunk
On the spirits of fear

This world has held my hand
And has led me into intolerance

And the least of these look like criminals to me
So I leave Christ on the street

This world has nothing for me
And this world has everything
All that I could want
And nothing that I need

We want the distraction and the peaceful feelings our culture offers to us in all kinds of packages. As people of faith, particularly as people forming our lives around the Way of Jesus, we must consider how and when our cultural traditions and narratives are growing intolerance and suspicion and fear in us. We must consider how our cultural practices force us to ignore the terrifying and complicated needs of others in order to reinforce the cultural story we desperately want to believe.

Before we move into Advent and a new liturgical year, we have this final Sunday to acknowledge the reign of Christ. Before wise men and shepherds and angels singing "Glory to God" and a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes snuggled away in a manger, we have this final Sunday set aside to remind us that Jesus is not a sweet, sparkly story to pull down from the top of the closet to make us feel safe and warm. Jesus comforted and healed and

blessed, to be sure, but he also flipped tables and stormed in his critique of religious leaders and challenged the popular notions of what real life was all about.

Jesus spoke consistently about the kingdom of God, scripture refers to Jesus seated on a throne, and the passion narratives of the Gospels share similar stories of Jesus linked to the title of king. What are we to make of all these images? There is a kingdom, Christ is the king, and the curious combination brings Truth to this world and to those who profess faith in Jesus as Christ.

Jesus is nearing an order of execution when Pilate asks, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus replies, "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."

As many times as we read this text, I think we're consistently disappointed when Jesus doesn't respond as we expect or hope. We want a fight. We want some action. We want a sound argument and maybe a firm shove to Pilate's chest. Instead we get a teaching moment, some word play, and then...crickets.

The powers of the world want him dead, and Jesus doesn't fight back. His lack of resistance fuels more fear and the people follow the power; even more want him dead. Jesus doesn't fight back. He is misunderstood; false allegations are made. Jesus responds not with a sound argument, "These accusations are egregious!" but with metaphor and silence. His responses are of a kingdom not from this world. We're dissatisfied because he doesn't respond as we do—labeling enemy, preparing for a fight, launching a defense. Because we're shaped by this world. And we don't understand what he's talking about, though we are curiously compelled by it.

"[W]ere he and his followers of this world," writes David Lose, "then naturally they would use the primary tool this world provides for establishing and keeping power: violence. But Jesus is not of this world and so Jesus will not defend himself through violence. Jesus will not establish his claims by violence. Jesus will not usher in God's kingdom by violence. Jesus will make no followers by violence."¹

Frederick Buechner then notes not Jesus' words but his lack of them. "Somebody should write a book someday about the silences in Scripture. Maybe somebody already has. "For God alone my soul waits in silence," the psalmist says (62:1), which is the silence of waiting. Or "Be not silent, O God of my praise," which is the silence of the God we wait for (109:1). "And when the Lamb opened the seventh seal," says the book of Revelation, "there was silence in heaven" (8:1) - the silence of creation itself coming to an end and of a new creation

¹ David Lose

about to begin. But the silence that has always most haunted me is the silence of Jesus before Pilate. Pilate asks his famous question, 'What is truth?' (John 18:38), and Jesus answers him with a silence that is overwhelming in its eloquence. In case there should be any question as to what that silence meant, on another occasion Jesus put it into words for his disciple Thomas. 'I,' he said, 'I am the truth' (14:6)."²

We're to be of God's kingdom and not the world's kingdoms. We're to belong to The Truth and not the distractions and false narratives of our world. We're to somehow follow all of this even though we don't understand what it means and even though the world around us doesn't encourage us to chase after understanding. We want to be placated and we want to be distracted, and the world will gladly help us in those desires. But Jesus...Jesus is of another kingdom, and his reign nudges us toward a Way that is both harder and better. We have a difficult time believing he is right.

"Jesus has come to witness to the truth," continues David Lose, "the truth that God is love (John 3:16), and that because we have not seen God and have such a hard time imagining God (John 1:18), all too often our imaginations are dominated by our experience. So rather than imagining that God is love, we imagine God to be violent because we live in a world of violence. Rather than recognize the cross as a symbol of sacrificial love, we assume it's the legal mechanism of punishing Jesus in our stead because we have way too much experience with punitive relationships. Rather than believe that God's grace and acceptance are absolutely unconditional, we assume God offers love, power, and status only on the condition that we fear, obey, and praise God – and despise those who don't – because so much of our life is *quid pro quo*."³

To understand Jesus as reigning over us or reigning over the kingdom of God requires our full imaginations. We are invited to imagine the world not as it is, not as we wish it would be in our fumbling, simplistic dreaming, but the world as God intended and intends. Karoline Lewis notes how important this Reign of Christ Sunday is in "realizing that Jesus' kingdom is a state of being, a way to live, a commitment to a particular way to view the world." Instead of choosing distraction, we choose imagination of a better Way for all people. We choose Truth. We reject fear and intolerance and apathy. We choose love of God, love of neighbor, and even love of self.

This isn't easy. I'm with you in the comforting temptation of denial—what can we do, you and I, to change the terrifying realities of this world? "In the face of sheer horror, peace seems impossible (Revelation 1:4). In the face of senseless violence, imagining the absence of terror seems hopeless. God's kingdom looks so very far off on these kinds of days, in these kinds of moments, in this kind of world. Working for God's kingdom feels like a rather futile

² Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*

³ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/christ-the-king-b-not-of-this-world/>

determination. It's not just an up hill battle -- it's unfeasible, even ridiculous to think that our efforts and energies can turn a world around into the world God sees it can be." And yet, Karoline Lewis quotes Richard Branson as saying, "'Changing the world begins with a small group of people who simply refuse to accept the unacceptable.' It is beyond hard to believe that we can stand up against the unacceptable, but we have to believe it -- we just have to."⁴

Because we belong to a kingdom not from this world. We belong to the Truth.

⁴ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3728>