

Of Truth and Bandits
John 18:33-37
November 25, 2018
Reign of Christ B
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It's increasingly odd to me that we end the church year with Reign of Christ or Christ the King Sunday. I don't really like the hymns that send Jesus way up high to a throne we cannot reach. It reminds me of the folk art Nathan and I encountered years ago in a little museum in Williamsburg, Virginia. Discovered after his death, a church-going man of humble means had rented a storage unit in which to make his masterpiece. It was a reflection on John's Revelation and the shining throne. The museum carefully removed every single piece of the installation and relocated it to a windowless space deep in their building to re-create the effect of walking into the storage unit to see the pathway and surroundings leading to the throne—each and every piece made from cardboard and wrapped meticulously in aluminum foil. It was spooky. It boggled my mind to consider the man who gave so much of his time and money and energy to creating this tribute to a passage of scripture that either gave him great hope, great fear, or great confusion. At the very least, the throne was central in his theological imagination and needed to be made real in some way.

How is this throne the bookend to our year as next week begins with lighting the first candle and waiting for the baby Jesus to be born? I believe the shift comes in asking what we mean by reign and what we mean by king. We're very good at taking our own cultural norms and concepts and laying them on top of the Jesus story. The now-practically-eight-week Christmas season is a great example. I think it's an awkward plot twist to begin with Jesus the Christ being born in almost invisible humility, fleeing as a refugee, growing up anonymously, and then leading a movement of seeing, noticing, naming, and healing those his religious tradition and secular culture were ignoring eventually to become a distant and powerful presence on a shining throne. Is that what we're marking today?

To me, the bookends only work if we are asked to reimagine what Christ's reign means and what kind of throne Jesus would every possibly call his own. Our Prayer of Confession and Affirmation today is a great invitation to imagination these questions of throne, reign, and kingdom:

Eternal Christ, You who rule over all of us with justice and care, we your people confess that we do not submit ourselves to your rule, that we do not always

participate in your reign of equity and integrity, that we have not followed the example you set forth. Instead we often place our trust in leaders who let us down, and in our own flawed leadership of others. Lead us, Christ our Sovereign, and set us on the path to righteous rule in all that we do. Amen.

In John's gospel, the people get a say after the long conversation and loud silence between Jesus and Pilate. The crowd can choose between Jesus and a bandit, and they put their vote with the bandit. This final Sunday of the church year invites us to read ourselves into the story and ask ourselves who we are following. Which story is guiding us and shaping the way we understand ourselves, each other, this world, and our God?

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 simply a new way of choosing bandits over truth. Does our guiding story grow our capacity for empathy, compassion, loving-kindness, peace, patience, gentleness? (Some of those "fruits" Alayna welcomed in baptism last Sunday.) Does our guiding story grow our ability to see and hear our neighbors in richer, fuller ways? Or...Does our guiding story give us permission to care about ourselves first and ignore the needs of anyone we deem to be too foreign, too strange, too unlike us. If we're going to mark a day to consider what the Reign of Christ might look like, then we must consider how our cultural and spiritual practices invite us to lean into or allow us to ignore the terrifying and complicated needs of others. Do our practices invite us to lean into or allow us to ignore the unlovely in ourselves? Are we leaning into or ignoring the particular and peculiar ways of Jesus?

Believe me, I want to rush past this day, too. I've already had my first day of pretending I can sing along ably with Handel's *Messiah* as I wrote out readings and worship notes for the weeks ahead. I desperately love the season to come, but let's be right here first. Today, we are here. 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 sing "Glory to God" and a babe is 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 while Bing Crosby sings. 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. His way ushers in a kingdom.

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? God has a kingdom, Christ is the king, and the curious combination mysteriously 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...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. Maybe we even want Pilate to "get it" and stand beside Jesus in a bold and clear way. Instead we get a teaching moment, some word play, and then...silence.

The powers of the world want him dead, and Jesus doesn't fight back. His lack of resistance fuels more fear and frightened people follow the power; even more want him dead. He is misunderstood; false allegations are made. Jesus responds with metaphor and silence. Even his responses are of a kingdom not from this world. We're dissatisfied because he doesn't respond as we do—labeling enemy, taking a side, 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."

Instead of violence, Jesus offers this practically untenable response of silence. Is it surrender? Conscientious objection? Resigned to what will be? Giving himself to another plane of awareness? Frederick Buechner observes, "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 a new creation 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)."¹

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 continue stepping onto the way of a silent Christ and not give our voice to the bandits. 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. There are days when 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; a kingdom ruled by Truth, 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*."²

To understand Jesus as 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 first imagined and still 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." We commit ourselves to choosing 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. What can we do, you and I, to change the terrifying realities of this world? How do we release our preference for bandits? "God's kingdom looks so very

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/christ-the-king-b-not-of-this-world/>

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 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."³

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

³ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3728>