

## **EVERY EYE WILL SEE HIM**

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

November 22, 2009

Scripture: John 18:33-37; Revelation 1:4b-8

The two lessons assigned by the lectionary for today are a feast of contrasts. Two of the most rich and yet unlike stories one might lay side by side. They're not Thanksgiving texts, but they are right for this last Sunday in the church year, Christ the King Sunday which is today.

The gospel lesson is that story of Jesus tried before Pilate, and the masterfully choreographed exchange between these two men who are in a chess game of wit and double entendre. John has saved the best of his writing, the most intense of his detail and drama for this trial, which is operatic in its scale and without equal in the other gospels.

Pilate and Jesus are in a cat and mouse game as the beaten but not defeated Jesus stands before Pilate on trial. Pilate, a two bit county politician portrayed in regal style, gets some of the best lines in the play. "What is Truth?" he asks... and there's a question for you. "I am not a Jew, am I?" he wonders out loud. And we wonder why he would ask such a question.

"So you are a king?" he poses to Jesus as Jesus stands before him, weary without a night's rest, lonely without his friends, soon to be bloodied and beaten by the guards in the praetorium. It is Jesus reduced to his lowest point, with little left to sustain him; his spirit if not his body ready for the cross.

"My kingdom is not of this world," Jesus chokes out at the last, and boy is that the truth, standing there in front of all the trappings of Rome's power, the palace columns, the purple robes, the guards with breastplates and swords. Pilate's kingdom *is* of this world and he has the bronze and steel to show for it. Jesus' kingdom could not be less worldly, and never more so clearly than at that moment.

The other story read today is a stark contrast, a story that comes from behind the gauzy haze of the veil that creates an otherworldly feeling about the words, almost as if they are a dream sequence. It comes from the evangelist known as John in the book of Revelation, and while his writing bears some of the vocabulary it does not quite have the same timber as the John who wrote the gospel.

He begins his book with a strange opening number, apocalyptic in feel and triumphant in spirit. It is a vision of a time yet to be when the whole world becomes God's sanctuary, and we become priests serving in the temple, offering God sacrifices and worshipping day and night, until suddenly there is a clearing, a break in the clouds.

"Look!" the cry announces. "He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail."

There is nothing vulnerable or tested, fainting or defeated about This One who comes in the clouds. The mood is different. This is the triumphant meeting of heaven

and earth where the king returns in power and glory, *and every eye will see him*. It is the glorious fulfillment of the end of time when God's reign is established on earth so that in the end, his kingdom *is* finally of this world but borne on the wings of the next.

There could not be two more different visions of the royal nature of Jesus and his reign over time and history. On the one hand, the gospel's Jesus is broken, beaten, defeated, powerless, suffering. On the other, Jesus is triumphant returning in power and glory. All the earth is his dominion *and every eye will see him*.

So, on this Christ the King Sunday, this last Sunday of the church year we mark one final celebration of the Lordship of Jesus Christ with an exclamation point at the end of a year of remembrance and rehearsal.

Only a year ago we waited expectantly in Advent for his coming. We celebrated his birth at Christmastide, we marveled at his glory in Epiphany. We prepared for his passion in Lent.

We ate at table with him on Maundy Thursday, and went out to the cross to keep a sorrowful watch on Good Friday. On Easter we got up early bearing spices and ointments and went to the tomb, and there we celebrated the surprise of his resurrection and triumphal victory over death. At Pentecost we marveled at the gift of the Holy Spirit, and on All Saints we remembered that we are part of a holy company who have gone before us, and others who will come after us, saints in heaven and saints on earth.

Until at last we come full circle to mark yet one more time the reign of Christ over all the earth, whose kingdom is not of this world, not yet, but will be one day, as seen by John.

Next week we start the journey once again. Advent begins with the lighting of the candles and the building of expectations; but before that, we pause to mark a truth we struggle to express, that Christ is Ruler of our lives and Sovereign over time and all eternity.

We struggle with it because his reign is understated much of the time and his power is not always evident. If he is the Prince of Peace, the Lord of Life, the Ruler of Creation, it's hard to prove it sometimes based on what we see.

As we near Thanksgiving, for instance, we do so aware that as a nation we are mightily blessed. Even though it is an uncertain time we will pile turkey and stuffing and beans and sweet potatoes and corn and pumpkin pie on the table; even in the shelters and food kitchens where bounty breaks through on holidays there will be enough. But at the same time we are aware that much of the world will go to bed hungry Thanksgiving night. While we are watching our football games in HD and surround sound, others will in places like Haiti, and Sierra Leone and China and the Sahel go to bed starving at nightfall.

The World Health Organization says that 1/3 of the world is well fed, 1/3 of the world is under-fed, and 1/3 of the world is starving to death. The Indian sub-continent

has nearly half the world's starving people. And lest we think hunger is a foreign problem, the Urban Institute estimates that 1 in 6 elderly Americans has an inadequate diet, and this in a time when the city wants to cut back funding of programs like the Caring Community here at the church which serves 75 seniors a nutritious lunch every weekday. Here in the United States, one out of every eight children under the age of twelve goes to bed hungry every night.

I am looking for the signs of Christ's reign on earth and in our midst, but not every eye has yet seen it.

The giddy excitement of new leadership in Washington not yet a year old has led to the disappointment of Health Care wrangling, frustration over the economy, and indecision about how many lives to invest in Afghanistan. With three years yet to go in the new president's term, politicians smelling blood are already circling the waters, going rogue and testing to see who will be the next pair of candidates in 2012. Maybe you, like me, have become cynical that anything worthwhile can be solved in today's media driven political environment. There's so much posturing and so little cooperation. What has happened to statesmanship concerned for the common weal, the larger vision of a people who are an experiment in democracy in which trust is inherent in governance?

When Christ comes again, maybe there will be no more cynicism, no more party politics with such sweeping consequences; at least there will be no more decisions to send troops into harm's way, because war will be no more. But in the meantime, does anybody see the signs of the heavenly king's coming yet?

I think about the way this economy has drawn us inward especially the people most directly affected by it. Those who have lost their jobs but still face monthly mortgages. People whose homes are not worth the paper on which they're financed. Those who are working two and three jobs and are still getting behind. The African American and Hispanic youth whose unemployment rate in this country is double the national pace. If the kingdom is coming, its signs are delayed at best, and there is not much yet to see.

I think about how cancer stalks the earth, looking for the young and the old. The pediatric ward at Sloan Kettering, the 79 year old I visited last week whose body is feeling the worst of it now. Our Executive Presbyterian, Arabella Meadows Rogers, is fighting the good fight against pancreatic cancer, and so far, beating the odds, but even she knows that it will not last forever. Much of the time as I walk that journey of cancer treatment with people, I have wondered which is worse, the disease or the treatment. And sometimes it's a toss up.

In the midst of suffering like that, has any eye yet seen his coming?

And yet, and yet...

"Look," John says, "he is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to

be.” John is confident that he who suffered the worst the world can do has triumphed over all that it has done and become the first fruits of our hope.

What we tend to forget is that John’s hopeful vision of encouragement was written not in a time of plenty and peace, of hope and prosperity, but in a time of utter despair. He is not some pie in the sky dreamer. He is a sufferer writing to fellow sufferers. The evangelist, himself, according to the tradition, was writing from Patmos, in exile, in a time of persecution in the church, encouraging Christians who were suffering, offering a sign of hope. A vision of a Christ victorious, shining brightly against all that the world could do to dim or destroy that hope.

“Grace to you, and peace,” he wrote, while serving up a vision of a glorious time yet to be when the oppressive powers of this world are pushed aside and unlikely kings return triumphant.

The world thinks visions like this are pipe dreams, the simple minded hope of Pollyannas, the fantasies of people who cannot accept the harsh realities of life.

Of course, what we believe about the future is conditioned by our understanding of history. It was Henry Ford who once said “History is just one damned thing after another.” And if that’s your view, then history has no particular purpose or meaning. No direction or connection. Events just unfold without anything to connect the dots. A life is nothing more than a random set of occurrences without any greater meaning.

But there is another way of understanding history. And that is to see that time and history are the plain on which God is working out his purposes. The same God who has created all things, and brought them into being who stood at the beginning of time, stands at the end of time as well, and shall gather us and all Creation to himself.

That’s what we affirm when we affirm that Christ is King of time and eternity; that life is not just one random thing after another, but that life is going somewhere and time and history are God’s to shape moving toward a purpose for good that God has in mind.

What happens if you live life in that way? What happens if you understand your life to be lived against the larger backdrop of God’s presence, leading us forward, pulling us forward in history, not just spiraling out of control?

I believe your life takes wings and your spirit flies. Life is no longer meaningless, but meaningful, because every day is a day drawing closer to God.

Myles Davis, the great jazz musician has said that the secret to playing jazz is not to play the notes that are there, but to play the notes that are not there. And maybe that’s exactly what we are meant to do on this Christ the King Sunday, play the notes that are not there, see the things that are yet coming into being, notice the signs of his presence that are yet to be made fully manifest.

Peter Gomes, Minister of the Memorial Church at Harvard writes,

John from the context of despair and hopelessness for the persecuted church, writes of an ultimate hope that says that God has not abandoned his creation and will not destroy his world. Genesis is not repudiated by Revelation, and reconciliation, not vengeance, is the core of the vision with which scripture ends.<sup>1</sup>

Maybe it finally boils down to just how good you believe God is. Whether God means for us well or God means for us ill, and whether God has abandoned his people or whether God has embraced us as his own. A kind and loving God could never abandon us; a good and gracious God will meet us on our way.

Every now and then someone so grabs a hold of this that they live out of its hope and are emboldened by its power in the face of the worst the world can do.

Many of you know the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who died in a Nazi concentration camp in World War II. He is one of those people whose faith helped him see from afar the hope of which Revelation speaks.

On April 4, 1945 after leading worship in the Buchenwald camp he was arrested by SS troops who took him to Flossenberg Concentration Camp. As he was being taken away, he said to an English prisoner, Payne Best, "This is the end – for me, the beginning of life." And that's it, playing the notes you don't see, looking for the signs that are not yet fully revealed and finding them.

In this vast world of indifference, in this city where people pass but do not touch, in this impersonal planet spinning in the vastness of space, we are not without hope. God has come to us and entered our experience, and knows what it is to be who we are.

In Jesus, God did that. And because God has, we are not alone.

We are not alone. We never were. We never will be. God will never leave us.

So, you who are living with treatment as painful as the disease, staring at the magazine waiting in the doctor's office... look up.

You who are worn down by the pace of work, the burdens that have grown, the pay that has frozen... look up.

You who are 25 years old, riding shotgun in a Humvee, on some desolate mountain road in Helmand Province, unsure that you will ever see 26... look up.

You who are lonely, living in this city of too many people and too few friends, struggling with discouragement, wondering if you should stay.... look up.

And you who are gathered about the Thanksgiving table, grateful for the mercies of a God who has brought you to this time and never left you alone... look up.

Grace to you and peace from the one who was and is and is to come. The king who was crucified will return triumphant. We have *God's* word on it.

Look up! He is coming with the clouds; and every eye will see him.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Gomes, **The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus**. New York: HarperOne, 2007. 227.