

St. Paul's Congregational Church  
November 25, 2018 – Reign of Christ  
A Wise Reign, John 18:33-37  
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Lamps and debt. A friend in the night, and a sower of seeds. Wine, nets, pearls, weeds, and treasure. What is the kingdom, the reign, of God like? It is like leaven and it is like two sons, like bridesmaids and sheep, like workers and judges.

Jesus describes the reign of God in the gospels 37 times – but not once is the kingdom of God like a kingdom of earth. Thirty-seven times Jesus reshapes the imaginations of his followers. Thirty-seven times Jesus tells them a story to help them remake the only world they know. And Jesus tells us the story, over and over again, to help us remake the only world we know.

The world of the disciples is one of domination and violence. Their world is one in which the wealthy and powerful rule over the weak, take advantage of that weakness, crush it under the boot, and lash it with the whip. A world not unlike our own. It is a world in which Caesar is both king and god, a cruel, irrational tyrant who takes vengeance against his enemies. A world in which the same thing happens today in many places.

Yes, there have been benevolent kings over time, but even to this day kingship is a word that signifies inherited wealth and power, hierarchy, and the destruction of one's enemies. We have to look no further than the reports this week announcing that the crown prince of Saudi Arabia ordered the gruesome murder of U.S. resident and Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi, a journalist who wrote critically of the royal family.

On this Sunday, the last one in November, the church makes room for Christ the King Sunday. This is the church's New Year's Eve, before we remember—once again—that God enters history as an impoverished baby, born to an unwed mother. But before baby Jesus is born we pause here today, remembering the God who formed stars and planets. We don't often get the opportunity to celebrate Christ the King Sunday – it usually falls on Thanksgiving Sunday – the next time is 3 years away - but this year we have the extra week – and it strikes me that maybe this year especially, it's a good thing to take the time to ponder what it means that Christ is King. My reading this week included an article from Sojourners Magazine – and I am so appreciative of its perspective.

A little history from the article: the roots of Christ the King feast day go back to 1925 when it was initiated by Pope Pius XI. It was a year of grief, the nations reeling from World War I as government structures and institutions devastated by war left a vacuum filled by terror. That year, Benito Mussolini made a speech to the Italian Chamber of Deputies that was the turning point for his reign of fascism. The Ku Klux Klan held a march in Washington, D.C. that attracted 35,000 white supremacists. In 1925, Hitler was rebuilding the Nazi party and solidified his role as absolute leader. The future was uncertain.

Pope Pius wanted to remind the church of God's absolute rule over history. In his encyclical *Quas Primas*, he writes to the people that the kingdom to which Christians belong is "spiritual and concerned with spiritual things . . . it demands – demands - of its subjects a spirit of detachment from riches and earthly things, and a spirit of gentleness. They must hunger and thirst after justice and more than this, they must deny themselves and carry the cross."

I wonder how these words sit with us now, our eyes on history. We now know that Mussolini went on to be one of the world's worst mass murderers, responsible for 400,000 deaths in World War II; 30,000 more during the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. The lynching of black people abetted by white Christians in concert with the KKK between 1882 and 1968 is a wound on the soul of our nation. Six million Jews, seven million Soviet citizens, and nearly a million other disenfranchised people died at the hands of the Nazi regime.

And we can't help but be led to think of today's world: events like the massacre of congregants at worship in the temple in Pittsburgh, school shootings, mall shootings, violent and hurtful rhetoric all around us, cruel treatment of people, men, women, and children, fleeing violence in their own countries, devastation from fires and floods. As we approach the end of our Christian year and focus on the reign of Christ the King, we ponder these events and the many other events of violence and terror, the mayhem and madness that stalk our land and the people of the world: open warfare, the destruction and death in Syria and the prospect of famine in Yemen – but only a few examples.

What do we say, think of, when we hear Pius' assertion that Christians are to be "concerned with spiritual things" in the face of such terror and madness?

It is striking to encounter Jesus' ambivalence about being called a king in the Gospel of John lectionary text assigned for today. Pilate ardently questions the incarcerated Jesus in hopes to force the rabbi's hand, to set

Jesus up as interloper to Caesar's rule. In response, Jesus says: "You say that I am a king."

And it's not just Pilate who is threatened, is concerned, who talks about recognition of Christ as King: the disciples talk about the future kingship, arguing over who will sit at his left and right. Each time, Jesus tells the disciples stories. Over and over again he roots the conversation about kingship of God in ordinary life, in what happens around us, not in throne rooms with princes and crowns but in baking bread and sowing seeds.

Maybe there's something different to consider.

The Sojourner article tells of Dr. Ada María Isasi-Díaz – born and raised in Cuba, who came to the United States as a political refugee with her family in 1960. She became one of the architects of "Mujerism": - Spanish for the word for Woman – a spiritual branch of the reform movement known as liberation theology. She argued that poor women, by the nature of their roles in their families and communities, exercised their moral agency, their spiritual concerns on the world more profoundly than any other group of the faithful. They did that in the small daily choices they made, she said: choices between paying bus fare and a 40-block walk to work, for instance; or between breakfast for oneself and one's child. Those choices embodied immense moral power – baking bread and sowing seeds.

We make those choices every day, don't we. Those choices have power! When Dr. Diaz heard a word for the first time: kin-dom of God rather than kingdom of God, something clicked with her own life experience –an interconnected community, seeing God's movement emerge from *la familia*, from the family God makes. Isn't that a goal for all of us in the church – the Body of Christ bringing in the reign of God.

Kin-dom became the language Dr. Diaz used to describe God's *libertad*, the liberation of God at work among people, the good news for those who suffer at the hands of kings. She wrote that, for Latinas, this liberation emerges from opening up space where love invites us into kinship, invites us to join others at a table that grows. Liberation is found not in hope deferred to another world, to life after death, but what can be created now; we Christians become a significantly positive force in the unfolding of the kin-dom of God." Liberation is now, our "preferred future" worked out among us, our common commitments, our community spilling out into dismantling structures that bind and oppress.

And if we are going to live into a preferred future, a life where the table is widened for the kin of God discovering who they are and learning about the power they hold, then we will have to hear the prophets echoing back to us the words of Jesus. We are called to recognize that the kin-dom is

happening all around us, even when we're so distracted by events in the world today. Isn't that where we are called as church, right here and now? To widen the table? To offer hope? To use the power God has given us through Jesus to make a better world? The power in the ordinary living, baking bread and planting seeds. Treating each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, all citizens of the same reign.

So, how do we move forward with the banner of Christ as our King in a world that still seems to shout, "We have no king but the Emperor?"

Honestly, we can't escape the awareness that none of us are exempt from our own complicit responsibility for the world we live in. None of us can honestly claim we bear no responsibility for the sad divisions in our nation. Our dishonesty in pointing the finger at others is graphically described by someone who once said, "If you point your finger at someone else, there are three pointed toward you."

We look again at the dialogue between Jesus and Pilate – the clashing of worldly and spiritual kingship or kin-ship. One is the threat of raw and absolute power with which we are all too familiar and to which we are often subjected. It is the power that has called us to war as a legitimate, but seldom necessary solution. The other is a power that comes from disavowing the power of strength and might and turning to the power of love and redemption. Reminds me of Martin Luther King's teachings. We know the two are not compatible. We have to decide which we uphold. Reminds me of Joshua's call to the Israelites: choose this day who you will serve.

Another topic in the Gospel is one very much at the center of our politics and culture today, and that is truth. Jesus tells us he came into the world to testify to the truth. "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." There is no lie here; there is no shading or twisting of fact. The truth is that God loves the world, all of it, and gave his only Son to redeem it from sin and death.

The Nazis firebombed the industrial city of Coventry in England during World War II. The ancient cathedral was destroyed when the fire melted the lead on the roof and caused the building to collapse. After the war, a modern cathedral was rebuilt, but if you've had the privilege of visiting Coventry, then you know that next to the new building are the ruins of an apse in which an altar stands with a charred cross, behind it on the wall are the words "Father, forgive." These ruins were cleaned up by an incredible group of Interfaith young people after the war, to serve as a monument to peace. This place is a stark experience of the two opposing powers and the hope of redemption in the new cathedral where Christ in Glory is depicted above the high altar.

Images like this can help us in a time of discomfort and dread about what is happening around us today. And the words of Christ himself remind us that to belong to the truth means listening to his voice, which may mean tuning out the voices of others claiming to have the truth.

This is hard stuff, isn't it – but worth it and essential as we continue to discern our journey of ministry together, especially in this anniversary year. We are citizens in the Kingdom – the Kin-dom of Christ – how do we live that out?

We live as people of the truth, meaning we offer ourselves as ambassadors of the Good News to everyone. This does not happen by a sheer act of will. It happens by cultivating our attitudes and behavior through regular worship, the reading and study of Scripture, and our prayers. The more we feed from these sources, the more truthful our lives become, and less vulnerable to falsehood.

We live as servants of Christ the King. That means we find ways to serve him by serving others both within and outside our faith community. If we think we can't do that because of our limitations or fears, then we need to ask Jesus to show us what we can do. We listen and replenish our depleted resolve and strengthen us for living in a chaotic world.

We live as a people who see opportunity in the community of others. This includes embracing the stranger, the refugee and the homeless, those who have no helper. Just singling out one person in these categories and finding ways to help them are ways to honor Christ the King.

We live as a people who hope in the life of the world to come. That doesn't mean we discount this world altogether for it is God's creation, given to us for our joy and benefit. But we know it is not where we are destined. Our hearts are restless as we await what is to come.

Next Sunday, we begin a new church year and the season of Advent. As we sing, "O come, O come, Emmanuel," we are challenged to bring that coming closer with our hearts and minds and strength.

This is the New Year's Eve of the Church calendar – a time to look back, to look at where we are, and to look ahead. To make resolutions, to challenge ourselves to move forward, strengthened by each other, but most of all, to be strengthened by our God who has given us the ultimate gift: a Son to be born to live among us and show us the way.

In this week of between time, let us ponder what it means that Christ is King – our King who always wants us the best we can be – our King who will always love us and walk with us on our journey. Let us walk together toward the light that shines brightly for each one of us. Amen.