

“Just Rule”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Daniel

John 18:33-37

Have you seen how Romaine Lettuce industry was destroyed in a matter of days? If you had plans to enjoy a Caesar salad with your Thanksgiving meal, you had to find an alternative leaf. What a coincidence this happened the week leading up to Christ the King Sunday. There is a meme going around with my church geek friends on social media:

THE ROMAINE EMPIRE HAS FALLEN!

CAESAR IS DEAD!

LETTUCE PRAY!

Jesus said his kingdom was not of this world. And yet, he chose to be part of this world and to live among us. We see a vision of kingship first in Daniel. The Ancient One, it says, sat atop a throne of fiery flames and with wheels burning of fire. The throne would shoot fire that would flow out from the Ancient One's presence. The Ancient One wore white, and had hair the texture of wool. To get the power from this Ancient One that gives “dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him,” yeah, well surely, that kingdom is not of *this* world.

The initial audience who would have been reading Daniel were Jews living under the rule of Syrian Emperor Antiochus IV “Epiphanes”-- so nicknamed because he thought he was a manifestation of the gods-- “outlawed the practice of Judaism and forbade the population from following the Torah.”¹ Whether the ruler is Pharaoh, or Babylon, or Emperor Epiphanes, or

¹ Amy Merrill Willis, “Commentary on Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14” on *Working Preacher*, Nov. 22 2015

Caesar; whether the ruler is Hitler, or Stalin, or the slavemaster, people living under oppressive rule have found hope when they realize God's rule is more powerful than what a greedy or dangerous earthly leader may offer. And even if God's just rule is not recognized by the law of the land, the idea that God can rule in our hearts and minds-- a place even the most powerful rulers cannot touch-- gives a sense of freedom and hope for something better.

Jesus' kingdom was not of this world, either. Soren Kierkegaard shared this parable as a way of understanding Jesus' kingdom:

"Once there was a prince who was on the verge of inheriting his father's kingdom and becoming the king. After many years of training, study and apprenticing his father and the wise elders of the kingdom deemed him ready for the role of King. His only hesitation was that he was single. He wanted reign with a partner by his side. He wanted to marry.

So far all the eligible young women that he had met at court just did not stir his heart or his soul. He wanted to marry for love and friendship. One day he was riding through the marketplace when he was struck by the sight of the girl who sold beautiful and sturdy pottery at one of the stalls. It was her eyes that captivated him at first. They were kind and sparkled with fun. They were thoughtful as well. In fact he found that looking into them was like looking into the depths of a clear, deep well. There were shadows and sunlight there. He began to observe how she treated her customers with respect and fairness, yet always struck a good bargain for her family business. He saw the steadiness and fine, detailed creativity of her work during times when customers were scarce – throwing pots at her potter's wheel and painting those ready for the kiln. Needless to say, he fell in love.

"How shall I approach her? Get to know her? Let her get to know me?" thought the prince. As prince he could simply order her to marry him. But he wanted to marry for love. He could arrive at the door of her humble

home in his regal uniform on a fine horse bearing gifts and sweep her off her feet. But he wanted to marry for friendship and shared values, not because he was a prince that could offer a life of rich luxury. Perhaps he could disguise himself as a daily laborer and get to know her at the marketplace. Then when they were in love and ready to marry he could reveal his true identity. But he did not want to marry out of manipulation.

After much contemplation and with his growing love for the young woman as a guide, the prince finally made a decision. He would renounce his claim to the throne. He would move into the neighborhood in which she lived and begin work as a carpenter for he had been trained in architecture and in the fine art of carving in his studies. He loved the feel of the wood in his hands. He would get to know all the people in her community, go to mass with them, make music at parties with them, help build their houses, shop with them in the marketplace. In this way he hoped to he would become the young woman's friend and someday confess his love for her. And that is what he did."²

That was Kierkegaard's parable. And, it speaks to the mystery surrounding Jesus' identity which others such as Pontius Pilate were constantly trying to unveil. "Are you the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked him. "Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. *What have you done?*"

The Messianic Secret-- or the effort for Jesus to hide who he really was-- may have worked to protect Jesus for some time. Sort of like that uncle at Thanksgiving who your parents always told you showed up with his best friend-- but when you were old enough to really look at them and see them, you could tell they were partners who deeply loved each other. People who were really listening to Jesus, whether they were his followers or those

² This synopsis of Kierkegaard's parable is from Jane Ann Ferguson, "King or Kin?" in *Sermon Stories: Lectionary Based Stories for Worship* Nov. 13, 2015

who found his teachings threatening, could see that the kingdom of which he spoke was not the expected kingdom of Empire.

When our kingdom is not limited to the laws and norms of this world, when we are not shackled by the people or things that try to rule our minds and hearts, we have the ability to dream to imagine the world as God would have it.

When I was in Atlanta, Georgia with my family over Thanksgiving, we took a day off from feasting and climbed Stone Mountain. If you have never been there, Stone Mountain is this massive quartz-granite rock. I am in awe of the natural wonder that is Stone Mountain, and I love to hike it and see the view at top. My family went there often when I was growing up, but it was not until I was an adult that I learned of its troubling history. For years it was inhabited by Creek and Cherokee Indians, but in the 1800 it was used as a quarry. The quarry owner was an active member of the Ku Klux Klan and he allowed the Klan to gather at the top of the mountain. Although they stood beside a flaming cross, what this group really worshipped was white supremacy. Some close associates of the Klan raised money to carve a memorial to the face of this beautiful, magnificent mountain, of the generals of the Confederate Army. Now, although the residents of the city of Stone Mountain are 73% black or African-American, they have looming above them, seen for miles, the faces of people who fought to keep them enslaved.

But there was someone who was very good at explaining the limits of human power and kingship, and he was good at explaining to this country what it would look like to consider instead to look to God's holy reign of love to rule us. His name was also King, and he was from Georgia. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. made this speech, and over the past weekend I was thinking about how much the imagery of Stone Mountain played into his 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom Speech:

“I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal.'”

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its Governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places plains, and the crooked places will be made straight, and before the Lord will be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the mount with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the genuine discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, pray together; to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom forever, knowing that we will be free one day.”

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done. May we find ourselves free enough from the kingdoms of this world to discover the beauty, the goodness, the peace, and the justice of the rule that Jesus offers. Amen.