

“A Raining Truth”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
November 21, 2021
Reign of Christ Sunday

Psalm 93
John 18:33-38

This Sunday, Reign of Christ Sunday, is a day when it becomes clear that our words, our assumptions, are not good enough to speak of Jesus. I’m going to try to, anyway.

The word our lectionary tradition gives us to speak about today, however imperfectly, is King. Christ the King. Does the label fit? Pontius Pilate wonders about it. We wonder, too.

The bible has a fraught relationship with the role of a king. Beginning with Pharaoh and his unrighteous rule, and leading through the governor Herod, through to Caesar, and then to Nero, the bible often differentiates the people of God from the greed, violence, and corruption of earthly rulers and kings. Even the prophet Saul, the child who was the answer to Hannah’s desperate prayers we discussed in worship last week, warned the Hebrew people against assigning a king to rule over them. Still, they insisted; and by the prophet Saul’s anointing, the Davidic monarchy began.

Fast-forward many generations, many wars, many kings, and you find God’s people in exactly the state that Saul had warned them about. They followed their king, and then kings, when the monarchy divided into the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. Yet these earthly rulers were flawed, and ultimately led their people into their own demise. Psalm 89 describes the downfall of the Davidic monarchy.

But the Psalms that follow in the 90’s, including Psalm 93 which Eulalia read today, each point the worshipper to *God* as king, declaring, “The Lord is king! Yahweh is robed in majesty! Your throne is everlasting.” This shift-- from the kingship of David and his descendents, to the kingdom of God-- announces to the reader that in God, there is a different kind of reign, one that has something to offer that none of our earthly kings or rulers have been able to accomplish yet.

I understand how frustrating it is to not have the righteous rule of a good and just leader. I long for it, deeply-- especially after this week of hearing testimony of people who have claimed frightening forms of leadership-- from vigilante truck riders in Georgia who lynched a black man, Ahmaud Arbery, when he looked out of place to them, to a 17-year old with an AR-15 style gun in Kenosha, who killed 2 and injured another, to white supremacist demonstrators in Charlottesville, who celebrate the idea of a nation without brown, black, or Jewish people.

Nadia Bolz-Weber once said in a sermon, “if we are going to celebrate a king here today at least it could be one who will wipe out all the racists and those who do violence to women and those

who hurt children and everyone who is more interested in protecting the wealth of the rich than protecting the wellbeing of the poor... Considering the number of bombings and shootings and hate crimes toward trans people that are daily events, then if Christ is my king he's doing a lousy job of smiting my enemies."

Bolz-Weber goes on to say, "But the problem is that when that vengeance-seeking and violent part of me calls out to have a king who would destroy my enemies, I inevitably would be the one whom that same king would have to destroy, since God is the God of all and I, too, am someone's enemy. And where does that leave us?"¹

I sometimes fear that we are so conditioned by earthly kings and lured to desire what they claim to offer us, that we may not even recognize the kingdom of God when it is right upon us.

I remember in my early twenties, one of my roommates was a photographer for an ad agency. She was assigned an ad for a computer protection program that monitors children's use of the internet. She was tasked to find the scariest looking guy out there, and take his picture. The ad would have a picture of Scary Guy, hovering over the shoulder of an innocent looking child, who is staring, wide-eyed at a computer screen.

So off my roommate and I went to scout the Euclid Avenue Yacht Club. Any Atlantan knows that the Yacht Club is nowhere near the water; its patrons, rather than wearing Ralph Lauren sweaters tied around their shoulders, wear leather; tattoos cover their bodies and faces, at least the parts not covered with facial hair. The Euclid Ave. Yacht Club is actually a biker bar. When my roommate Andrea and I got there, we quickly found several candidates to pick between for the role of Scary Guy. But we discovered, as we struck up conversations with the bikers over canned beer and darts, that they were some of the gentlest, kindest, most respectful strangers we had met. As much as the name "Yacht Club" was ironic for this bar, the guy who ended up modeling for Scary Guy was ironically quite kind.

If there were a dive bar called "Kingdom of God," I wonder what surprising people you might find in there.

Jesus told Pilate, "For I was born, and I came into this world, to testify to the truth." Pilate responded to Jesus, "What *is* truth." And Jesus does not reveal an answer to him, or to us.

Jesus, couldn't you have just shared with us, THE TRUTH?! I mean, a little more specifically? Because I think we are a little lost out here.

My family in Georgia is one of many who are divided on how to gather, or whether to gather, for the holidays. Are any of your families like that? I have the advantage of distance to make it not such a big deal; my household plans to drive down South for a family visit *after* the holidays, when everything is a bit more relaxed and things do not feel so fraught. But between vaccine status, masking preference, Q-anon conspiracy theories, and more, it's been hard for everyone

¹ Nadia Bolz Weber, "Fall On Your Knees: A Sermon for Christ the King Sunday" December 1, 2015

to find enough commonality to bring at table together, and to feel safe doing it. It's as if we are all scrambling for a corner of truth, and when we think we find it, it is a little... well, lonelier than we expected it to be.

Jesus did not give an answer in words to Pilate's question about what truth is. But he did give his answer with his body, with his life. And it was never smug; his truth was never used as a weapon. The truth of Jesus does not fit onto a bumper sticker, and it certainly looks awkward in a jeweled crown. Jesus said, "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

Have any of you seen or read *Harry Potter*? I love the part, each year, when the children head off to Hogwarts school of Wizardry. They have to find Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$, at King's Cross Rail Station, which is somewhere between platforms 9 and 10, and with some amount of confidence, walk straight through a brick wall. Then, they will be transferred into this new, magical world with a gleaming red train engine, cars that can fly, chocolate candy frogs that can hop, and so much more.

Jesus gives us glimpses of the Kingdom of God throughout our teachings. Sometimes, these teachings sound as strange as a mustard seed that grows to be the largest of trees instead of a humble shrub, or a party full of prostitutes and tax collectors, instead of the expected devout. The other thing Jesus gives us is portals that, with some amount of faith, we can walk through to find it. Sometimes, it is through prayer. Sometimes, it is through the difficult and humbling act of forgiveness. Sometimes, it is through risking your privilege or even your life for truth.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story about a seminary student she taught: a South African priest. She says, "he shared a story about what it was like to believe Jesus was King during the days of apartheid. 'Our whole congregation was arrested,' he said, 'for refusing to obey the government.' I thought I misheard him, but he went on to say that all 240 members of the congregation were arrested and put in jail -- from babies to a 90-year-old man. 'At least babies and mothers were kept together,' he added. The pastor himself was imprisoned for a year. To claim that Jesus is King can be dangerous."

Next week, we begin our Advent journey toward Bethlehem, where in another month we will welcome this king whom we worship. His palace? A stable. His throne? A manger. As we get ready to visit and worship this baby, let's cast aside the crowns of our assumptions to make way to receive him, and to take part in a different kind of rule than any king we have ever known.