

Revelation 1:4b – 8 ~ John 18:33-37
Another World is Not Only Possible, She is on Her Way
 Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday ~ Stewardship Commitment Sunday
 November 21, 2021
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Introduction to Scripture

I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is and was and who is to come, the Almighty. (Rev. 1:8) Those beautiful words were given to John in exile on the island called Patmos, in the late first century. This revelation gave agency, vision and hope to Christians being persecuted for refusing to worship Caesar as god. These symbolic words painted a picture, for them and for us, of Christ our Savior reigning in heaven and on earth, as far as the eye can see, beyond what our minds could possibly imagine, or our tongues describe. The reign of Christ the King is boundless: Bursting the boundaries of time and space. Yes, the reign of Christ extends far beyond a particular political ideology. Far beyond any national or cultural boundary. Jesus' kingdom is not from this world, yet God sent Christ crashing headlong into this broken and hurting world. Which leads us to our second scripture lesson.

Try to hold on to that cosmic image of Christ as we prepare to plunge into the sweaty courtroom in Pilate's headquarters, where Jesus has just been handed over from Caiaphas, the high priest, to Pilate. Flies are buzzing. Hearts are pounding. The disciples have fled the scene. Peter has already denied knowing Jesus three times and the cock has just crowed. The wheels are coming off the bus.

Our lens zooms in to focus on two people: Pilate and Jesus. Listen closely to the exchange we are about to hear between them. The irony is so thick you can cut it with a knife. Pilate peppers Jesus with questions. But Pilate either cannot or will not hear what Jesus is trying to tell him. Jesus is "telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." But Pilate does not listen. Perhaps living in a "post-truth" era, a concerning reality we think is so twenty-first century, is not really so new at all.

Sermon

The food has been served. Everyone wants to start eating, but there is a slight hesitation, and then it comes, "Pastor, would you say grace for us?" I realize my presence at a dinner table probably both relieves the host ("Oh good, we have a "professional" to do the blessing.") But at the same time, having a pastor in the room adds a bit of tension or uncertainty if having a table blessing is not the usual habit of a particular family or group of friends: "Better do one, since the pastor is here." And if the food has already been plated, the hard-working host may worry about the food temperature dropping by the time the long-winded pastor gets to "Amen."

As you anticipate your Thanksgiving meal this week, who will say grace at your table? You may not have thought about this small detail yet. It has been two years since we've been able to gather safely with out-of-town family and friends for Thanksgiving and we are out of practice. Yes: The chance to reunite for our first post-vax Thanksgiving is thrilling. And

challenging. The usual political fault lines which exist within most families two years ago may have centered around the upcoming presidential election or the urgency of climate change. But this year it has become more immediate and personal. Where we stand on vaccinations and masking, impact decisions about how and with whom to gather, even among our dearest of family member and friends.

Here is my advice and hopefully your takeaway from this Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday sermon. Take your cue, find your power, do your part to bring Christ's kingdom of grace, truth and love, to your Thanksgiving gathering. How? Lead with grace. Not just before the meal, although that will help. Lead with grace and continue, when in doubt, to extend grace. When you start to get your back up, or you feel tensions begin to rise: take a breath and take a listen to Christ's voice. Envision Jesus at the table with you. Ready to help you extend grace. Be the person through whom that *other* world is seen and heard at your table. That world that Jesus was talking about. The world that Jesus comes from.

As psychologist Emily Esfahani Smith wisely points out, when a family member shoots a barb, a passive aggressive comment or behavior, take a breath and remember this: Even though it sounds and feels like contempt and rejection, those words, are actually something else. They are a disguised bid for connection. Here's an example, if someone says, "You never call me," what they are really saying to you is, "How are you really doing?" or "Let's catch up."ⁱ Do your best to let that comment slide by or glance off your shield of grace, and truth and love.

Say or sing to yourself "Let it go." Just like Elsa sings in the first Frozen movie, "Let it go." If you happen to know or are within orbit of a child under 10, you know what I am talking about. Young Elsa learns and then teaches anyone who will listen: "Let it go...the cold never bothered me anyway." And when the cold barb does hurt you, listen for the voice of Christ, let the light of Christ's truth lead you.

Let's talk zoom the camera back into Pilate's headquarters where we can learn more about Christ's kingdom of grace, truth and love for a moment. Did you hear what Jesus said to Pilate, not once, but twice? To Pilate's question, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus told him: "My kingdom is not from this world." Christ is not from this world, but Christ came into this world, into our hearts, into our living rooms and dining rooms, to usher in a community that lives in radical love, truth, and righteousness. As Frank A. Thomas, professor of preaching helpful points out, "Do not confuse this with some sort of sentimental vagueness that requires nothing of us except that we try to be nice. This realm of God affirms what is good, true, and just in every age, and it corrects what is misguided, unjust, and wrong."ⁱⁱⁱ I would add....gracefully.

Belonging to the Truth, who is the Christ, may help us as we navigate differences not only with loved ones across a dinner table, but also with strangers we can't understand, or even detest, if we are honest. What's really driving tensions, both political and personal, is actually something much deeper than mask and vaccine mandates. It is deeper than our feelings about the verdict in the trial of Kyle Rittenhouse, or as we await the verdict in the trial of the three men in the shooting of Ahmaud Arbery. It is deeper than the differences in the way we perceive the

direction our country is heading economically or politically. That deeper truth is this: All of us yearn for love, for connection and above all, for belonging. Regardless of our race, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, education, income, or whatever else divides us: we long to be valued for who we are. We long to be loved as God's beloved child. As we are in the world Chris came from.

Christ our sovereign, calls us therefore to lead with grace, truth, and love. And when we do, as Indian author, Arundhati Roy has poetically written: (and the source of my sermon title)

*Another world is not only possible, she is on her way.
On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.*

Where do you hear her breathing? Often Christ speaks through unusual persons in unusual places. Sometimes those voices make us uncomfortable and challenge our assumptions. Consider where the destiny and truth lie in our gospel lesson. Christ challenges us "to remember that destiny and truth did not reside with Pilate and Rome but with a carpenter from Nazareth."ⁱⁱⁱ

Where do you hear the word of grace, truth and love, the Reign of Christ breaking in to our world today? I heard Christ breaking into our world when I learned about the scores of Black clergy gathering outside the Glynn County courthouse after the defense attorney tried to have Black pastors barred from the courtroom where the three men are on trial for the shooting of Ahmaud Arbery. When I read the Accelerating Acceptance Study report that 81% of non-LGBTQ people expect that nonbinary and transgender people will become a more familiar part of life just as gay and lesbian people have, I heard the Truth of Christ breaking in with love and breaking down assumptions that hurt and sometimes literally kill God's beloved children.

Closer to home, here in our FPC church community, I see her coming in the new "Juntos" program we are hosting in January. Do you know the Spanish word, "juntos"? It means together. And it is the name of a program provided created and run by 4-H, to support undocumented families to help their children succeed educationally. I am also delighted to share a quiet inbreaking that has just begun: clergy across our Marshfield community are finding common cause as we begin to explore the possibility of supporting Afghan Refugee families to resettle here in Marshfield. There are still 11,000 Afghan refugee guests living at Fort McCoy, only 67 miles from here. And one third of these refugees are children.

If the pandemic has taught us anything, I believe it has taught us to be more aware than ever of how short our lives on this earth actually are. And how quickly our lives can change or end. As we prepare to bring our pledges to God for 2022 forward on this Reign of Christ Sunday, I will conclude with a prayer composed by Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw. He originally wrote it as a reflection on the anniversary of the martyrdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador. It is titled "Prophets of a Future Not Our Own."

*It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.
 The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
 it is even beyond our vision.
 We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction
 of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.
 Nothing we do is complete,
 which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.
 No statement says all that could be said.
 No prayer fully expresses our faith.
 No confession brings perfection.
 No pastoral visit brings wholeness.
 No program accomplishes the Church's mission.
 No set of goals and objectives includes everything.
 This is what we are about.
 We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
 We water seeds already planted,
 knowing that they hold future promise.
 We lay foundations that will need further development.
 We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.
 We cannot do everything,
 and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
 This enables us to do something,
 and to do it very well.
 It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
 an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.
 We may never see the end results,
 but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.
 We are workers, not master builders;
 ministers, not messiahs.
 We are prophets of a future that is not our own.*

ⁱ Emily Esfahani Smith, "Families are Reuniting for their First Post-Vax Thanksgiving" see: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/18/opinion/thanksgiving-christmas-family-tension.html>

ⁱⁱ Frank A. Thomas, "Reflections on the Lectionary," *Christian Century*, Nov. 3, 2021, p. 23.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas B. Slater, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, ed. Green, Long, Powery, Rigby, Sharp, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2021) p. 507.