

First Presbyterian Church
John 18:33-37, “You Say That I am a King”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 11/24/2024

You may have noticed a theme today, from the welcome and call to worship,
to the songs we’ve sung and the texts that have been read,
we’ve been dwelling on the theme that Christ is King.

Did you know that Christ the King Sunday is always
the last Sunday in the Christian liturgical year?
Next week we begin the new year of worship with Advent.
So this is like New Year’s Eve!

This is more than just trivia:

We end our worship year by declaring that Jesus is king.

We begin our worship year by awaiting that king’s arrival –
historically as a child, and today in contemporary world.

Because if we’re not careful, we can easily get confused by the word “king.”

We can be pulled into a form of thinking

that isn’t really any different from saying

that Jesus is the ultimate CEO. The old man upstairs.

The head honcho. The Pope’s president.

If Jesus is king, what does that *mean*? If we don’t think about it,
we fill in the gaps with our go-to stereotypes for powerful leaders,
which is precisely the opposite of God’s hope for us.

In order to understand what it means for Jesus to be king,
we have to understand the nature of the kingdom of God.

In John 18, we have a story of Jesus standing before just such a king.
A powerful Roman-appointed regional governor named Pontius Pilate.
Pilate has taken custody of Jesus after the Jewish leaders
took Jesus from the High Priest Caiaphas.

Pilate is a man with tremendous earthly power.

He orders the movements of soldiers,

lives in a palace,

controls immense wealth

and commands the attention of all who stand before him.

Specifically, he wields the authority of the great Roman Empire
in the region of Judea and the city of Jerusalem – the land of the Jews.

It's this man of power who stands in the Praetorium.
and asks Jesus in v. 33 - "Are you King of the Jews?"

Jesus responds to Pontius Pilate as he would any questioner
on the streets of Jerusalem or Galilee,
returning a question in response to a question:
"Is this your idea or did others talk to you about me?"

For someone in custody, this is a non-standard response to a judge's first question.
This is an incredibly intense and serious moment,
but I almost wonder ...
could Jesus have been playing around with Pilate a little?

In v. 35 Pilate displays some patience by explaining his area of interest:
"You were handed over to me by your own nation's leaders –
what did you do?"

Pilate seems to be perplexed about what has provoked this situation in which Jesus,
supposedly a Jewish king or claiming to be a Jewish king,
to be handed over to Roman authorities by the Jews? What did he do?

In v. 36 - Jesus, again, doesn't answer directly,
but rather describes the unusual nature of his kingship.

He says, "My kingdom is not of this world."

Quite a statement.

It implies that Jesus is, indeed, King – but not the kind of King
that Pilate is used to encountering.

Nor is Jesus the kind of King the Jews were used to encountering.

As evidence, Jesus notes that his followers have not fought to prevent his arrest.

In fact, Peter sliced a guy's ear off when Jesus was being arrested.

But Jesus miraculously reattached it,
and it was clear at that point that combat tactics
were not to be included in Jesus' regime.

When Jesus says his Kingdom is not of this world,
we correctly intuit that Jesus' Kingdom is a heavenly one.
But let us not think that means it has no tangible connection to earth.

Jesus was not just a "King of Heaven" but was rightly called the King of the Jews.
The land Jesus was born on was land of promise,
a geographic and cultural environment that was indispensable for
shaping Jesus' childhood, maturation, faith, understanding,
ministry...and kingship.

The dust of Israel's streets, the wine of its vineyards,
the figs of its orchards and the grain of its fields permeate Jesus'
relationships, teaching, healing, and miracle working.
If we forget the Jewishness of Jesus and the land that he lived in,
then we strangely disembodied the miracle of the incarnation.

So let us make no mistake: it is a Jewish King of Israel
who stands before Pontius Pilate.
And yet(!) -- his kingdom is also not of this world.

"So you are a king, then!" Pilate said. (He thinks he's got Jesus cornered.)
"You say that I am a king," Jesus replied.
You say that I am a king. What sort of ruler do we say Jesus is?

You might know that we have been working with Randy and Edith Woodley
from time to time at their farm in Yamhill where they
teach and practice indigenous ways of farming and leadership.
Here's how Randy talks about the nature of God's kingdom in his book,
Shalom & Community of Creation (p. 32):

Christ's clear call to the "kingdom" (in Greek, *Basileia tou Theou*)
may be understood as a time and place where God is in charge, namely –
shalom. Jesus' kingdom announcements reveal that his incarnation was the
once-and-for-all divine intention and that God was still calling all people
into shalom community. Jesus lived out a shalom life, pleasing to God,
being led by the Holy Spirit and in communion with God. He was always
inviting people, especially the marginalized, into God's community or
kingdom. Jesus not only demonstrated shalom in his earthly lifetime, but he
is the ultimate shalom come from God. Jesus' all to kingdom is most clearly
recognized in context as a *shalom kingdom*."

Randy goes on to suggest that if Jesus' kingdom is God's way of holistic peace, or shalom, expressed across the whole created world,
then the phrase "Community of Creation"
might be a better way for us to understand the concept of
"the Kingdom of God" in our own time and place.

Jesus is not a king in the way that Pilate thought, nor in the way the Jews thought.
Jesus reigns over God's peaceable community of creation.

When I get frustrated at the world, that things aren't going the way that I want,
I am tempted to pray that God would take control of our politics
and our economy and our industry and our military
and make it all work THE RIGHT WAY. (According to me.)
But if God did that, it would mean establishing a very earthly kind of kingdom,
specifically the kind of kingdom that Jesus says is *not* part
of the Holy Spirit's agenda.

On the other hand ... if I go for a walk, breathe in the smell of wet leaves,
consider the beauty of lichen and moss on the branches of Oregon oak,
listen for the sound of chickadee, scrub jay, squirrel...
I can enter into the Community of Creation,
then I am able to receive the Kingdom of God
which is *within*,
rather than striving for an external kingdom
of power here on earth.

This is the gospel, but it does not take us out of the world
or make us indifferent to the machinations of power we see around us.
It infuses us with love that cannot be changed by executive order,
it transforms our vision to understand
what no algorithm can comprehend or predict.

I don't know if you've noticed, but this is the third week in a row
that I've been saying the same thing to you.

Two weeks ago, I asked the question, "Who Reigns?"
We read from the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus said,
"Do not worry about your life."
Instead, Jesus said, consider how God cares for...
the community of creation.

Who reigns? Christ reigns.

Last week, I shared Jesus' message that we must "keep watch."

We have to pay attention – not to the powerful people, but to our hearts,
to our relationships, to our neighbors, and to the created world.

We need to rescind the lease on our attention span
that we've foolishly given to the tech-bros of the world,
and instead draw it back to attention on our Creator.

That is how we enter into God's way of life, shalom, the kingdom that is within us.

Today, "You say that I am a King."

What kind of a king do you worship in Jesus?

What kind of a kingdom do you pray for?