

Reign of Christ
Sermon 11.25.18
Scripture:

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14

As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne, his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence. A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.

As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

John 18:33-38

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the authorities. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate asked him, "What is truth?" After he had said this, he went out to the religious authorities again and told them, "I find no case against him."

The boys had heard of Black Friday but had never experienced it themselves. Those doorbusters, those steep price cuts and irresistible sales, all set to get a store's finances back "in the black"—Tobias and Jack had heard of all this, but had never experienced it for themselves. Within sight of a city for Thanksgiving, just outside D.C. at Jesse's parents' house, they really wanted to see what all the fuss was about, to take advantage of sales and maybe even to get caught up in some melee. So I promised them, "Tomorrow, we'll go to Target at 10 AM," making my commitment as nailed down as possible, lest it be consigned to, "Yeah, that *might* happen."

"Good! We'll get an early start," Tobias said, as if knowing this (getting an early start) was part of it.

"No," Jack said, he always a bit wiser to the ways of the world. "No, to get there early we'd have to line at four in the morning."

"We're not doing that," I said.

"We *know*," they insisted.

They know, there are certain things...

At Target, I found a low empty shelf near the toy aisle where I could sit and read the news on my phone while they sought out still more Nerf guns. I happened to be near an aisle where a beige plastic pony attracted the attention of more than a few little girls. One who seemed to be about seven years old and was shopping with her grandmother was especially taken with it.

“Look!” she said, breathless, taking it clumsily off the bottom shelf and settling herself astride it. About thirty inches high, it filled the aisle, though it did little else. She pulled its plastic reins and it lit up and made a mechanical neighing sound. “Look,” she said again, though her grandmother remained un-enchanted. “I don’t get it,” she said flatly, and in so doing spoke my own heart. “It doesn’t do anything. You just sit on it and it makes noise.”

“No!” the girl insisted otherwise, but I was with the grandmother. Remembering the heartbreak of so many broken toys with so many dead batteries (Tobias especially susceptible to the promise of toys that would go unfulfilled), I could have said what the grandmother said. “It’s a noisy bench. It just makes noise and you just sit there.”

I also thought of Tobias and Jack, these lucky bumpkins, and their ranging around our neighborhood, a new discovery for them the horse farm where a friend from school lives and where they now spend time whenever they can. They come home dirty, muddy, *wet*, having shoveled and moved hay and learned which horses to stay clear of because they’re big and powerful and, if caught off guard, dangerous.

I find it distressing that for most American kids a horse is a notion with a vaguely similar shape from horse-ish-thing to horse-ish-thing, a suggestion more than a reality. I find it distressing that the simulacrum of experience is more really and frequently felt than actual experience—be it of horses or of any number of other things. There’s an untruth in it all, in the lives of children and in the lives of adults, a deception that demands something of me that more and more I simply cannot give.

Target is full of these deceptions, and not just Target.

“That’s not a horse. That’s a noisy bench,” I could well have said, trying to dispel what would have ended in a broken heart and more plastic in a landfill (sooner rather than later), such that to ask me to call it a horse is to ask me to do something I simply cannot do.

This is my horror at having Donald Trump as president. A reality television star, he brings that same deceptive enchantment to the Oval Office and I can't abide by it. His words are slippery non-committals, less lies than evidence of an inner void, lacking mass, absent of gravitas. His leadership is but pretense of what the mob injects into him and then calls out of him and then rewards him for with their thrall. He is a living, breathing internet meme, mimesis embodied, jangling with notions that have no discernable origin, made real only by replication, a playing out of them again and again, chants that become tweets that become events that become headlines: "Lock her up!" "Build the Wall!" "Crucify! Crucify!"

Oops. Wrong mob.

Something's always puzzled me about the history of the Ancient Near East. The Babylonian Exile: was it tolerable or intolerable? Was it horrifying or manageable, maybe even sort of good? Read Lamentations and you'd gather it was horrifying, Judean society in collapse, brought low by imperial brutality. Read Ezra and Nehemiah about the return from Babylon to Judea, and you'd gather there was nothing more urgently longed for than the exile's end—ugly, whorish Babylon in retreat. But read Ruth, or read between the lines of Ezra or Nehemiah, and you'd hear of people marrying (and having inter-married), parenting children and earning a good living in this quite forgiving foreign land. You'd hear of Jewish custom and practice largely allowed, even Jewish thriving much as in America today. Sure, there were outbreaks of violence; there were crackdowns of imperial custom. But read Daniel, spooky a book as it is, featuring monsters that represent rulers (menacing kings, ferocious emperors, four-headed cheetahs and winged lions whose limitlessness is the horror. [Lions that can *fly*? God help us!]) Read this much less silly Sharknado of a book, and you also hear of a Judean and several of his friends rising to prominence in the court of the Babylonian ruler. It's all always left me puzzled: was the exile thoroughly negative, terrifying a stripping away of all hope and humanity, or was it in some ways for the good?

I think I get it better now, because life as I've always known it, which used to feel tolerable, suddenly feels intolerable. The church in America, and in the modern West, is just such a body politic in exile, called to be a gathered body yet amidst a setting that is ambiguous at best, that is in important ways not our true home. We are, though, empowered to live as if already amidst our true home, if in varying degrees. There are times when our culture more closely adheres to the values of Christ, in whose loving reign we are as if to live; and there are times of deep departure,

even thoroughgoing deception. The cynicism, the nihilism, so obviously in play now: these have always been there, just to lesser degree. And I know, I'm no dummy: absolutes are for the reign of God. I know: I'm not a child, so I get that our living in this world comes down to matters of degree—which isn't to say it's all relative, just to say it's largely relative though measured by the standards of an absolute, the absolute love of God revealed to us in the cross of Christ who lives and reigns that all the brute world might be ruined, spoiled by this appeal and imperative to love.

It all makes me wonder, though, which is worse, when the politics are good enough that I at least go to sleep as regards the sharp dissonance of our public life from the call of the gospel, or when then politics are more primitive, more enthralling to some while scandalous to others, even intolerable to the point of breaking? Really, which is worse, when our cultural and political context has masked itself well, or when it all feels more apocalyptic, which is to say more revealed and revealing—that there is no justice in the system of justice, that there is no authority in the one in authority, that there is no truth in the one who is appointed to hold to truth that there might be some re-adherence to, and building up of, a common good, that there might be some reference to the absolute?

Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, which means he was ostensibly the most powerful man in the region. And yet look how he shuttled back and forth between his own headquarters where Jesus awaited him and outside those same headquarters where the chief priests awaited him. They (those religious authorities) couldn't enter Pilate's office because that would have defiled them, and they wanted to stay ritually clean for the upcoming Passover celebration. So they demanded that Pilate come out to them, which he did. This, though, left Jesus alone in Pilate's office, an implied abdication of authority that indicates a real problem—the one in charge has vacated, is compromised, corrupt, and in this way is not in control and yet is still very much exercising power.

This dissembling, though bad enough on its own, also fueled the dynamic that Pilate would further do the priests' bidding, do for them what they couldn't do themselves, that is put someone to death, that is put Jesus to death. Though Pilate could find no case against him, the priests wanted what they wanted, and the mob wanted what it wanted: "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

And so it would be: a meme that broke out into real life. IRL. Lulz upon lulz.

But, really, how could it not be? Pilate was empty, hollow, trans-missive for imitation to pass through rather than something more massive so to put a stop to such viral invective.

“What is truth?” he wondered, not a man, not a leader, but a piece of laundry hanging on a line. I almost feel sorry for him.

No, I do.

The word used here is *aletheia*, a Greek word whose root is *lethe* meaning forgetfulness, concealment, deception, oblivion. *Aletheia* is, then, the opposite of such things. It is disclosure or dis-discovery or un-concealedness; it is the state of being evident or factual or real or abiding or remembered as in “Whenever you eat of this, do so in remembrance of me.” *Aletheia*, unforgetting, evident: it is truth.

Pilate’s question, then, is deeply ironic—for in his asking it, it is disclosed of him that there is nothing to disclose, that he is all dissembling and expediency, that he is neither authority nor abiding, that the question arrived at in hollowness reveals only hollowness. With Pilate and his ilk, there is no truth: there is nothing to see here but what havoc they wreck for their mindlessness, their unreality though made terribly real. Even that though: that will fade into oblivion as the people move on to some other event of thrall. Jesus would be crucified tomorrow. But it would be someone else the next day. And so it would go, and the people would be shocked by not surprised.

For John, though, it’s another matter; it is indeed matter, material, *evidently* imperative. “John,” our writer of this gospel of John: he makes use of the term *aletheia* fifty-five times. Indeed, *aletheia*—that is unforgetting or mindfulness or reality or truth: this is the very reason that Jesus has come. This Word of God made flesh and now full of grace and truth came so to reveal a truth that makes us free and to lead us in a Way that is the Truth and the Life. This, according to John, is why Jesus has come, is the essence of Jesus’ presence and witness among us. What’s more, this is why Jesus is said to be the Word, and why in Daniel’s vision of the Ancient One who has come to ordain a reign on earth that is just and true, it is signified by the opening of books. Books—because these ancient traditions that we continue to live into would have us know that words matter, and that a certain violence is done when words are deployed to name falsely or to deceive.

This is the last Sunday of the church year. This is the culmination; it’s to feel as a completion. It’s strange, then, that it should end on such a cynical note, or a perhaps just exhausted note: “What is truth?” That’s actually a terrible way to end a story that purports to be

about the supremacy and reign of truth. It's as if a murder mystery concluded, "The butler did it!" and the book then ends with a crucial character suggesting, "But did he?" The End.

So I'll let you in on a secret: it isn't supposed to. The last gospel reading of the last Sunday of the church year doesn't end with Pilate's question, but with Jesus' bold assurance to him, "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." The folks who set the Revised Common Lectionary decades ago left Pilate's pathetic question off the end, thus giving Jesus the last word.

And that's the right way to end the church year.

But, of course, the fact of our yet living means that every ending is also a new beginning. So I always take that question on—"What is truth?"—because it sets our agenda for the coming year.

Next Sunday, we begin again, and as ever with this purpose, to establish a firm footing in the truth that abides and implores. We will gather amidst a culture that would have us divorced from truth, would have us call things what they are not and desire things that merely distract, enchant. We will gather as if in exile from this culture whose rulers are passing illusions though which break into real lives, and to great harm; this culture whose politics court the worst in us though for social ends that demand the best. And this will be our place for gathering: this plain, quiet, honest room that is ill-fitting for the ambient, flickering frenzy that would otherwise encompass us, and is therefore well fit for our purpose of dis-covering once again, "This is truth, *aletheia*: this very dis-covering!"

An ending then, and a moment's rest, before we begin again.

Thanks be to God.