

November 21st, 2021

John 18:33-37 “Fake News Isn’t New”

I’m not sure if I have another, “You want to start a lively discussion in church” topic for you this week. There might be one. I don’t know. We’ll see. This is the last Sunday of our church year which means next Sunday is the first day of Advent. That’s when we get to start a *new* church year. The purpose of the church calendar is to guide us through the story of Jesus which is why it starts with anticipation and birth, moves on to his life and ministry, followed by his death and resurrection, which leads to the birth of the church, and finally ends in celebration of God’s coming reign. That’s where we are this week. Today is “reign of Christ Sunday” or as some traditions call it, “Christ the King” Sunday.

The gospel text I chose this week is usually one that we reserve for Holy Week on Good Friday. It’s Jesus’ big showdown with the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate right before he was crucified. It’s part of what we call “The Passion” which is the story of the last few days of Jesus’ life. The lectionary gave us John’s version of the story this week, which, I’ve got to say, as much as I’ve been appreciating John’s gospel more and more lately, this one ties me up in knots. John portrays Pilate much differently than Luke and the other gospel writers do. In fact, John seems to portray Pilate much differently than *history* records. Pontius Pilate was a ruthless Roman governor who crucified *many* Jewish dissidents in his territory. He was merciless beyond even Roman standards. The Pilate of history would not have been at all reluctant to crucify anybody, but that’s what it looks like here in John’s gospel. And this whole “reluctant Pilate” or even the “Inquisitive Pilate” is a great way for the gospel writer to emphasize Jesus’ “kingship,” but it hasn’t helped at all when it comes to Christians vilifying Jews. John’s version of this story makes Pilate look like the reluctant ruler who didn’t want to kill Jesus ... it was those bloodthirsty Jews who did that. So I just wanted to point that out so this doesn’t become a “Romans were the good guys and the Jews were the bad guys” story.

This passage is about how political power is wielded by the kingdoms of the earth versus the way it is wielded in the Kingdom of God. Jesus spent most of his ministry teaching folks about what the reign of God is all about and how it is so radically different than anything that the empires of the earth ever had or ever will be able to offer. When Jesus came onto the scene in the first century, the entire Mediterranean coastline including what used to be the kingdoms of Judah and Israel was under Roman occupation. Now Rome fancied itself as benevolent dictators. Their philosophy was “We’re here for your own good” which is akin to someone saying, “I’m from the government and I’m here to help.” So, my challenge today is to try to make some sort of sense out of this passage and make an attempt to discover the good news here.

Two things occurred to me as I was considering today’s gospel lesson. The first was a question about the relationship of Jesus’ kingdom to earthly kingdoms, specifically the earthly kingdoms of today in the 21st century. Pilate was getting kind of snarky with Jesus when he said, “Listen, your own nation has handed you over to me!” Then Jesus said that his kingdom ... his nation wasn’t of this world. So what does that say about those of us who want to follow him? What is *our* relationship with the nations of this world?

The second thing was what Jesus said about truth. He said, “I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” And Pilate say, “Truth! What is truth?!” And that’s when it occurred to me that the idea of “fake news” isn’t new! We live in troubling times. As a nation we’ve been through much worse, but ... it’s been a while ... maybe before any of us in this room were born. And it seems like the world is just getting more bizarre, more extreme and less kind. We used to be able to pat ourselves on the back and say, “Oh, look at all those uncivilized, backward little banana republic countries with their dictators and their coups. We’re so much better and more sophisticated than they are.”

So many people nowadays are feeling angry, and frightened, and disconnected. And this isn't just happening in our country either. There are a lot of other smug, sophisticated, civilized nations that are feeling this too, and what's odd is that many of these nations' "we're better than all the rest" attitudes are what led us all down this path in the first place. When Pilate interrogated Jesus, questions of national interest were at the heart of the interrogation. His first question to Jesus was, "Are you the King of the Jewish nation?" Pilate was the Roman governor with the responsibility for making sure that the Jewish nation didn't try to reassert its national independence and break out from under the rule of Rome. So any oddball messianic type who emerged as a new Jewish nationalist leader needed to be kept under control. You either pledged your allegiance to the status quo of Roman rule, or you were eliminated.

But as Pilate pointed out, Jesus' case was unusual. This was an era where it was quite common for religious and nationalist zealots to rise up and to rally an armed revolution against the Romans. It happened a lot. Then there was Jesus. He hadn't proclaimed himself as a king. He didn't look like any kind of threat to law and order. He wasn't wearing face paint or horns or anything like that. And the ones who were accusing him of setting himself up as a rival king weren't the agents of Rome ... it was his fellow Jews. So Pilate gets straight to the point, "Are you the King of the Jewish nation?" And Jesus says, "My kingdom is not from this world." Notice that he doesn't say that it's not *in* this world or that it's not *for* this world. He says it is not *from* this world. And he illustrates the distinction by pointing out that his followers are *not* taking up arms to fight for him.

Pilate understands this. He gets that Jesus' kingdom isn't the Jewish nation. But Jesus didn't say, "I'm not a king." Which prompts Pilate to say, "So you *are* a king then?" To which Jesus says, "That's your language, not mine." Or in other words, "That might be the only way you can understand things, but it's definitely not how I'm thinking." What's crystal clear in this passage is that Jesus rejects the nationalist agenda ... especially as it relates to the kingdom he represents. So then

why do so many nationalists in our day and time say they're Christians? Or at the very least they want to curry favor with Christians. Oops. I think I just found our, "Want to start a lively discussion in church" moment. Some folks will say, "Well of course nationalism isn't good, but if the nation you're representing is a 'Christian nation,' then hey ... call me a nationalist." But Jesus makes it abundantly clear in this showdown with Pilate that he doesn't want to have anything to do with that.

What *is* Jesus all about then? It's right here in the gospels - "Love your neighbor as yourself." Who is your neighbor? The person who isn't like you. The Samaritan. The leper. The widow. The orphan. The tax collector. The thief on the cross. How many nationalist leaders in this world have you ever heard say, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you?" That's a Jesus quote by the way. King Jesus. King Jesus who is not from this world and who is grounded in loving our enemies. Direct quote from Matthew 5:43 with an almost word for word parallel in Luke 6:35. Fake news! Right? Wrong. We don't get to dismiss news that is inconvenient to our beliefs as "fake" just because we don't like it. That's why Pilate said, "What is truth?" He's used to the truth being whatever he says it is and he will back that truth up with force if necessary.

Again, the *term* "fake news" might be new, but the *concept* isn't because Pilate was quick to dismiss Jesus' claim that he came into the world to testify to the truth. Jesus said, "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Not the voice of Caesar. Not the voice of the President, or the Prime Minister or the King. Not the voice of those who try to stir up fear and hatred. Jesus says, "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to *my* voice ... lives by *my* words." And the boundaries or interests of individual nations have nothing to do with it.

So where am I going with all this? I don't know. I'm a little lost myself to be honest. But this last day of the church year is calling us to pledge our allegiance to following Jesus as our leader. The gospel story itself

makes it clear that Jesus is no ally of nationalist politics. Politics, as we know it, is not going to be our savior. Jesus comes to save us from our self-destructive hostilities and resentments and racisms and sexism and elitisms and nationalisms, and from the spiral of conflicts and fears that they have plunged us into.

And if we are to partner with Jesus to help bring this salvation to the world, it will mean following his methodology. That means renouncing the ways of the kingdoms of this world that take up arms and do violence to those we disagree with. We've got to be willing to stand before the cynical purveyors of fake news and testify to the truth of God's all-inclusive love and care while boldly declaring that our *only* allegiance is to an entirely different kind of kingdom: A kingdom that has no borders and no identity grounded in accidents of ethnicity or opportunities or origin. We bear witness to God's light and truth. May God's kingdom come, may God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.