

Reign of Christ Sunday, Year B
Sermon 11.21.21

Revelation 1:4b-8

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

John 18:33-37

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 Jews. 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." (310)

The quality that makes the difference between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of Christ is whether the members of the kingdom fight to keep the reign in power, or don't. I'd never noticed that before, but there it is. The qualitative difference between kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of Christ is whether fighting is a part of it all.

I'd always inferred as much, of course. I'd always inferred that to follow a crucified Lord means we're not to fight back, not to return evil for evil but to overcome evil with good. Paul wrote that in his letter to the Romans. But the way Jesus is remembered to have said it here casts it in a different light, a clarifying light. "If my kingdom were from the world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over..." It's as if this is the qualifying aspect, this is the tell. You can tell any kingdom of this world by its members fighting to keep it in power, and you can tell the kingdom of Christ by its members not fighting, rather trusting that it will be victorious no matter what, so no fighting is necessary, indeed fighting is anathema to it: to fight for it is to make it not.

There are a lot of people these days fighting to stay in power, to keep their guy in power. That's the "tell."

So, not to fight: can you trust *that*? Can you *trust* that the kingdom of Christ, this reign of love, will be victorious no matter what, eventually at least so no fighting is necessary?

Hear that again: “No fighting is necessary.”

Augustine of Hippo is remembered to have said, “The truth doesn’t need you to defend it.” There’s a lot of reason to believe he didn’t say that, so pithy, so quippy. But that doesn’t make less the case. The truth doesn’t need you to defend it.

But that’s a tall order, right? There are so many reasons to fight these days.

This is the last Sunday of the church year. Next Sunday is the first, the first Sunday of the new year, the first Sunday of Advent, that four-week season that helps us prepare for Christmas. It’s been forever that such a thing as a liturgical year has helped people mark time—but it might be relatively new to the likes of us.

The church calendar has echoes of the Jewish liturgical year, the practice of which stretches back to before the Babylonian Exile, eight, nine centuries before Christ. The earliest text that mentions a Christian liturgical cycle is from the 14th century after Christ, the East Syriac rite of the Eastern Church, eight seasons of nearly seven weeks each. But that’s not to say it hadn’t been a practice since before the 14th century, even long before.

The Western Church developed its own version of this, the Roman rites, and with the Protestant Reformation, starting in the 16th century, each new denomination developed their own calendar of seasons and festivals. Lutherans, Anglicans, Calvinists. But with each new iteration there was a further shedding off many of those old forms, many of those festivals and feast days until the Anabaptists came along (Puritans, Quakers, Shakers, Mennonites) and proclaimed every Sunday is Resurrection Day and the rest as noise.

That’s an oversimplification, of course. And I am very much at home in this low-church tradition that is New England Congregationalism. But it’s worth wondering what was lost with the shedding of so many feast days and festivals. It’s not for nothing that the Protestants were often felt as a punishing lot. And it wasn’t the intent, of course, but one effect of shedding these old forms has been to abandon us to secular time, workaday, week in and week out, where the sacred can only hardly break in—the *kairos* breaking into the *chronos*, the *kairos* of time—the eternal, the beyond—breaking into the chronology of history, the line of time grinding on like factory conveyor delivering us ever on. Not but hardly! (So, get back to work. Get back to work, you. Time is money! Justify yourself!)

What a relief that even we Congregationalists have come around, celebrating even this, this most ill-fitting thing in our democratic polity and our democratic governance: Christ the King Sunday, this to crown the year.

The Revised Common Lectionary of 1994: it's more and more come into practice—Presbyterians, Methodists, even the famously self-determined Congregationalists, the United Church of Christ. I only know one UCC pastor who rejects the liturgical calendar for it being too “papist,” and he's now retired.

As for this crowning Sunday, though, he's not wrong. It *is* papist. This, the culmination of our long journey from waiting for the coming one to come, to celebrating his having come in the birth and incarnation, through the living of his days and his ministry among us, to his suffering and death, to his rising and yet living, now to his coming to reign over all though not by fighting and not by force but by the simple appeal of love, the enduring triumph of self-giving, even suffering, love (for what else is there?): it is indeed a papist thing. Pope Pius XI instituted this feast day in 1925.

This was the time, of course, between the two world wars, a dreadful intermission as it were. It was a portentous moment in history, not least for a global leader situated in Rome.

He did so as a response to the rise of ideologies and their spread across the global west, each of which promised salvation in their own way, their “realized eschatons,” which is to say heaven and a glorious end made real in history, in the living of our days, if only we do it right.

It's a question of whether the eschaton can be brought into history by human effort, or whether this is ever a thing to lie beyond history as the gracious and ultimate work of God.

Those who say it's only in the beyond that the eschaton will be realized easily become people who treat the world as simply a waiting room, or a testing ground, even a lost cause, so the best we can hope for is to keep our hands clean and get out, get to heaven, get saved and get going as it were. These are the ones who say the eschaton is made real only in the great beyond.

Those who say it's the former, that the eschaton can indeed be realized in history, can become people of such terrible zeal or punishing toil that there's little room in life for grace, hope, or joy because all of those are frivolous when you consider what work we need to get to doing. We've got to manifest heaven, and that's no easy thing.

As for me, I imagine it in as a parabola, an ever approaching of some impossible axis, the impossible perfection of an axis of the absolute. For the eschaton is beyond our ability to implement it absolutely in our living, and more especially in our living together. But it's a worthy goal to aspire to making it real, making it manifest in how we live and how we live together. What's more, God makes such a thing possible. By the living power and the on-going working of

the Holy Spirit in our midst, God makes available to us gifts of grace, gifts of joy, gifts of light to live amidst and further to manifest.

See, we live not just in secular time or chronological time, but we also live amidst *kairos* time, which is God's time, any given moment made full by God's presence or wisdom or creativity. That quality of time when it flows, when you lost track of it for it being so full, when it's felt on the vertical and not just the horizontal—a breaking in, a breaking in. The eschaton is not something we can ever fully realize, but it's God's grace that we might live as if it's so, that the coming one has come, that fullness of time has arrived, is here now, that the reign of love is triumphant in all its humility and need to serve.

The ideologies of concern to Pope Pius—deep concern: these were more muscular than that, more a product of human will. They promised salvation now, the eschaton realized in the closed systems they would insist upon. But all together they unleashed violence across the world on a scale previously unknown, unimaginable. Nationalism morphed into Fascism and Nazism, and gave us militarism, death camps, gas chambers. Communism gave rise to Stalin, the gulags, and famine across the land as collectivism failed miserably, catastrophically—oh, and militarism. It gave us more militarism. Secularism is the least directed of the three, and its failures are more but arguably the case. To the degree, though, that secularism drains the sacred from our lives and abandons us to a world in which we should find fulfillment in the accumulation of things and ultimate fulfillment in the realized eschaton made possible by capitalism, the heaven of having feathered our nests, the bliss of having collected the most toys, it's at the very least disappointing when it isn't devastating. It's certainly less horrifying than the other options, but it is anyway heartbreaking, to go through life wondering, is this all there is?

Oh, and it also gave us militarism, in fact a military-industrial complex, war-making with a strong profit-motive. It gave us the bomb. We have to defend “our way of life.”

And it's easy to hear Christ the king as triumphant: “Our guy wins!” It's easy to hear this as permission to force conversion upon an unsuspecting world—which has indeed happened from time to time throughout history. When Christianity met colonialism, it was ugly indeed.

But it's important to note that on this climactic Sunday, the gospel reading we're to hear in each of the three liturgical years never imagines Jesus' resurrected back to life, never imagines Jesus ascended up to heaven, never imagines him in all the ways he could be argued as “victorious” or triumphant. It always remembers him on the cross or, as today, on trial heading for the cross—not triumphant, but broken, not victorious, but overcome and shamefully so.

This isn't a triumphant king, this is a suffering king, suffering for his love for the world and his refusal to adopt the ways of the world—that instead the world might adopt the way of Christ, which is the way of love.

It's been yet another tough week. There is *so much* fighting these days. There is so much violence on the loose in our culture, and threats of violence in places and among people I never would have imagined resorting to such a thing. David Frum, former speech writer for the presidential administration of George W. Bush, tweeted about this trend: "If political/cultural/media leaders talk often enough, approvingly enough, about shooting people to impose their political will by violence - sooner or later some of the followers may get the idea that the leaders want them to do it."

Relatedly, Kyle Rittenhouse was acquitted this week on all charges, having brought an assault-style weapon underage and across state lines to an already dangerous situation, riots that followed protests that followed police across the country involved in incidents or gross violence against Black Americans. These are dots that in my mind it's about time we connected. But with the gun charges thrown out, Rittenhouse was argued to have acted within the law. Yet what's legal isn't necessarily what's just, and it certainly doesn't portend good trends for our common life.

Worse, if Rittenhouse isn't merely acquitted but becomes lauded, as has been the case, we're very far gone. We're in very dangerous territory if his actions become a celebrated standard for behavior. If he becomes our hero, we're in deep—though we're primed for such a thing. Every major movie out in the last twenty years has lionized people who exercise extra-judicial power, people who are vigilantes, even to the point of death, mass death. Batman, Spiderman, Black Panther, Wonder Woman: these are vigilantes. It's just they look really good. (Really good.) But that's the seduction of good old-fashioned Fascism. Mussolini wanted his troops to look good—and they did. His was a politics almost entirely of appearances, an aesthetics of evil, as it were, bearing no resemblance to its reality, bearing mere dissemblance. Hitler wanted his stormtroopers to look *really* good—and they did! But they were thugs. Beneath all that crisp, well-tailored wool crepe, they were thugs, destroyers of human creativity and genius, destroyers of art and culture, and destroyers, of course, ultimately of people—all those lovely, rough, soft bodies made ugly and then broken and at last burned, so many people.

There are lot of guns out there. There's a lot of provocation to use them. There's a lot of provocation to fight.

We are not to fight—because that’s the tell. That’s the tell of kingdoms, of reigns, that are simply, grossly, thuggishly of this world, that are not of God, that are not of Christ, that are not of the eternal reign and eschatological hope to which we are called, amidst which we are called to live even now, even now, for the sake of which we are pressed upon to serve.

This is difficult, this life of faith. Really, there is no greater challenge.

We’ve come to the end of the church year.

Before we begin again, it’s worth wondering whether we’re up for it, whether you’re up for it. You have options, after all. We have other things we could spend our lives serving. They’ll come to nothing, these things. They’re lies, deceptions, smoke and mirrors and ultimately ash. But we do have options. You do have options.

As for me, I’ll be here next week, with songs of hope, candles to light, glory to wait for and watch for. If you’re here too, I’ll see you then.

Thanks be to God.