

Sermon "Truth Telling"

Scripture Readings: II Samuel 23:1-7, John 18:33-38

Christ the King Sunday, November 21, 2021

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Today, we conclude the Christian liturgical year on Christ the King Sunday. This Sunday marks the occasion of the last words we speak before the new church year is upon us in the Season of Advent. In our first scripture reading, II Samuel 23:1-7, we read David's parting words as he reflects on his reign as King. It is an opportunity for truth telling and David does not disappoint. We learn through this oracle that David's reign was only as successful as it was just, humble, and kind. This is what the Lord requires! Listen for the Word of God.

Now these are the last words of David:

*The oracle of David, son of Jesse,
the oracle of the man whom God exalted,
the anointed of the God of Jacob,
the favorite of the Strong One of Israel:*

*² The spirit of the LORD speaks through me,
God's word is upon my tongue.*

³ The God of Israel has spoken, the Rock of Israel has said to me:

One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God,

*⁴ is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning,
gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.*

⁵ Is not my house like this with God?

For God has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure.

Will God not cause to prosper all my help and my desire?

*⁶ But the godless are all like thorns that are thrown away;
for they cannot be picked up with the hand;*

⁷ to touch them one uses an iron bar or the shaft of a spear.

And they are entirely consumed in fire on the spot. Amen.

Our second scripture reading is John 18:33-38. During this interaction with Pilate in the early morning, we read some of Jesus' last words before he is sentenced to death on a cross. It is a holy conversation (as all our last conversations are), an opportunity for truth telling, and Jesus does not disappoint. Hear now the Word of God.

³³ Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" ³⁴ Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" ³⁵ 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?" ³⁶ 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." ³⁷ 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?" Amen.

The title of the Sermon: “Truth Telling”

Text: For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. John 18:37b

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, thank you for the deep desire within each of us to know and to seek the truth. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

As a young woman learning the art of preaching, I was drawn to the works of Frederick Buechner, a contemporary American writer, theologian, and ordained Presbyterian minister. As I contemplated what I might say about truth telling this morning, I looked for Buechner’s book Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy & Fairy Tale on the bookshelves in our library at home and, thankfully, I found it.

The truth telling in Jesus’ last conversation with Pilate is not about the ninth commandment “thou shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” Lying, fabricating falsehoods, and perjury are offensive and bear particular consequences when done in the court of law. This truth telling is about the difference between right and wrong.

Neither is the truth telling in Jesus’ last conversation with Pilate about the problem of misinformation on Facebook or the reality that depending on which news media one watches, there are two distinct understandings of what is true in America and in our world today. This truth telling is colored by differing political agendas.

Both of these “truth telling” discussions are important and worth reflecting upon; however, in the interest of time and relevance, we will save them for another day. No, the truth telling in Jesus’ last conversation with Pilate goes to the heart of the gospel and the meaning of life for both men.

Jesus is on trial for his life. The false witness has already taken place and the misinformation about Jesus will abound for centuries to come. On one level Pilate holds the power over Jesus’ life and, truth be told, on another level Jesus holds the power over Pilate’s life. Jesus has just told Pilate and those who read John’s gospel who he is. After explaining that his kingdom is not of this world, Jesus says, *“I have come to bear witness to the truth.”*

At this the procurator of Judea pauses and asks his question. In the words of Frederick Buechner: *He asks it half because he would give as much as even his life to hear the answer and half because he believes there is no answer and would give a good deal to hear that too because it would mean just one less thing to have to worry about. Pilate says, “What is truth?” and by way of an answer, Jesus doesn’t say a word. You could hear a pin drop.*

Buechner goes on: *We are all of us Pilate in our asking after truth, and when we come to church to ask it, the preacher would do well to answer us also with silence because the truth and the Gospel are one, and before the Gospel is a word, it too like truth is silence—not an ordinary silence, silence as nothing to hear, but silence that makes itself heard if you listen to it...silence that also confronts us with the truth about ourselves.*

After the silence and in the midst of the honesty created by the silence, the words that best articulate truth are found in poetry, according to Frederick Buechner, which more than polemics

or philosophy, logic or theology, is the language of truth. It is the prophets of old who have given us the gift of truth in the words of poetry.

Hast thou not known? says Isaiah, *“Hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? There is no searching of God’s understanding. God giveth power to the faint, and to them that have not might God increaseth strength.*

Amos has God speak this truth to the people. *I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies... rather let justice roll down like mighty waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

And in David’s parting words in II Samuel, we learn this truth: *One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless day gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.*

Buechner’s final words of wisdom for preachers who seek to be truth tellers ... *Use words to stir in us memories and longings and intuitions that we starve for without knowing that we starve. Use words which do not only try to give answers to the questions we ask but which help us to hear the questions that we do not have words for asking. Use words and images that help make the surface of our lives transparent to the truth that lies deep within us...the truth of who we are, who God is, and who Christ is.*

On this Christ the King Sunday we celebrate and proclaim the truth of God in Jesus of Nazareth, who gathered little children in his arms, who calmed the sea during the turmoil of life’s storms, and who turned the world upside down by revealing God’s truth which like the light of morning, is more kind and just than any imagined.

When Jesus came face to face with Pilate before he was sentenced to death, his last words in the early morning shed light on and testified to the truth. As we commemorate the reign of Christ the Truth Teller on this final Sunday of our Christian liturgical year, may we celebrate the gift of silence that speaks to truth, may we hear the words of truth spoken by the poetic prophets, and may we tell the truth of this just, kind and loving Savior by the way we live our lives...A blessing indeed! Amen