

Reign of Christ Sunday, Year B
Sermon 11.24.24

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 18:33-38

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 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." Pilate asked him, "What is truth?" (310)

I grew up by the ocean. I spent a lot of time as a kid in the sands of Little Boars Head in New Hampshire, though admittedly not as much as my sister. She was, and still is, a more devoted lover of the beach, a thing proven whenever we're both back there with our families for a visit.

That said, it wasn't until I became the mother of two boys and the aunt of two boys that I saw sand-castle-building really take hold. With each of the four boys a year apart in age, sand-castle-building was a constant during our summer trips spanning from about 2008 until they ended with Covid.

The buckets, the shovels, the search for the perfect combination of dry sand and wet sand, the concentration and delegation of tasks and bigger boys vying for authority over the littler boys, and eventually the coming-in tide.

The coming-in tide.

When the tide has turned and has begun lapping and roaring its way back up the beach, the building goes from strategic, to reactive, to frantic. Half the labor now goes into repairing what's been washed away. The fight against the inevitable, sometimes thrilling and gleeful; other times simply too much.

Eventually, of course, the fight is lost, it's clear—and depending on how old the boy, depending on the time of day and the timing of the nearest nap, this whole process could involve less and less discernable fun.

I've had that thought a lot lately, the fight to maintain amidst an inevitable coming apart, the fight to withstand amidst inevitable ruin. It feels like a tide is coming in and I have very little fight left in me.

Did you notice: the quality distinguishing between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of Christ is whether the citizens of these kingdoms fight to dominate, or not. Whether they fight to maintain power or not: this is the qualitative difference between the two. Did you notice? “If my kingdom were from the world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over...”

I didn't notice for a long time, did only just recently notice, seeing at last.

Jesus said this to Pilate, according to the Gospel of John, on the last night of his life, at his “trial” just before his crucifixion.

The Gospel of John in particular remembers Jesus as so accepting of what was to happen to him—but not acceptance as similar to resignation: “Whatever.” It was acceptance more of wisdom, more of faithful knowing and even forgiving. Nothing surprised him, according to John. There was a wholeness in his living among us, such that everything that happened fell within his sense of wholeness, wholly God and wholly human and wholly enfleshed amidst the world, its calculations and machinations.

We're reading a commentary on the Gospel of John as a book club, which many of you know, as members of that club. Taking part in it, you're along for the ride with Karoline Lewis, a scripture scholar at Luther Seminary whose specialty is the Gospel of John, whose deep textual love is the Gospel of John.

It's a challenging thing she's taken up to do. Scripture is never easy to understand, never easy to explain. It's living-ness is what makes it hard. There are so many layers of meaning and significance to consider, from the meaning of each word of the original language, to the meaning of the words in context with the larger book and then also in the context of the larger collection of books, the Bible. There's the original historical and cultural context in which it was written, which is usually in contrast to what's been written. Because you don't have to write something down unless it's to make a distinction between the givens of the context and the assertions of the text.

We often assume a text reflects directly upon its context. But some are the stories written to stand in contrast to what's otherwise known, even assumed, an easy thing to forget.

And that's not even the half of it.

When it comes to John, this gospel, the challenge lies in the fact that no story can be well considered on its own. There's a wholeness to the text, a literary integrity that makes it so to consider one event testified to in the gospel is to need to consider all the others as well. The wedding in Cana only makes its profound sense if you remember the raising of Lazarus and the healing of the man born blind. The feeding of the 5000 only makes its profound sense if you understand the meal Jesus had with his friends before his arrest. It's as if, for example, to appreciate your Thanksgiving feast, you had to eat all the food in one single bite. It's only by the entirety that you can fully take its meaning.

But people don't usually work that way. And people in this modern era definitely don't work this way. We're used to the notion that you come to understand something by breaking it down to study its tiniest constituent parts. But John's gospel doesn't give us a Christ of constituent parts.

See, John's text has to work this way because John's Jesus as the Christ indeed "works" this way. The faith that this gospel means to express and inspire is a wholeness, a sudden arrival into seeing, into knowing. This is not a journey where you learn a little as you go, where at last you've learned all there is to know, about God and his beloved creation and his beloved son, and now, through accumulated information and experience, you come to understand. John's is not a process of discovery. This is rather an encounter with the truth and an arrival in that truth, a blindness to it until a sudden and entire seeing of it—a revealing, and then (it should be said) sometimes a reconcealing, until another moment sought for, another moment of seeing.

Like that time when I was at that zoo, in the reptile room, where I really ought not to have been. I'm never looking to have an encounter with a reptile. That's not ever something I want. But the kids were young (maybe 6, maybe 8) and that's what they wanted, and I couldn't well tell them to head in on their own (where, no doubt, they would tap the glass).

At the terrarium with the anaconda inside, the biggest snake species in the world, such a thing was promised and so I searched. But it was thick with vegetation, leafy trees, fallen trunks, a fabricated pool of standing water green with some organic film, all a convincing replication of where an anaconda might be found in the wild (God forbid.)

Unfortunately, though, it wasn't to be found in its terrarium. And I looked. Wound around the tree branches? No. Lying beside the green pool? No. Under the tree trunk, and wound into its shadowy decay? No. A few minutes I searched, even looking for a Post-it note somewhere on the glass, "Habitat under repair," growing proud at my fortitude and my disinterested curiosity.

Until I realized, with a chill, the tree trunk there.

That tree trunk: that was the snake. Thick. So long neither its ends were showing. Unmoving. Except for every once in a while: a flexing. I hadn't seen, and then I saw, and I felt like reality itself had unhinged its jaw and swallowed my seeing whole. I'd been living on an entirely wrong scale of things, a too limiting scale of things.

It's possible seeing Jesus as the One to whom we are blind until we are made to see could have come with the same chilling horror as seeing the grand monstrosity in so much of creation. And then it might come as shimmering, transforming beauty, utter love and irresistible appeal. Self-giving love. Self-offering mercy. Unquavering presence. A reliable indwelling of the eternal God, the thing we most fundamentally desire.

Truth, you could call it.

Jesus according to John clearly did.

It's not so fashionable a thing these days, the truth. Truths are fashionable, but not so much the truth. We are each to have our own truth, each to feel empowered to live our truth and declare our truth. But *the* Truth: it's not so fashionable a thing. Rather, the truth has been condemned as merely a power move. Of the one to declare the truth, the one to speak of the truth and especially on behalf of the truth: this is commonly thought to be merely a power move, an assertion whose sole aim is to seize and wield power.

It's a cynical way of seeing, and it might be accurate in some cases. Declarations of the truth have sometimes been made aggressively in service of maintaining power. Church authority has done this, popes of old and megachurch preachers more lately. Political authorities have done this, like when President Bush declared meaning behind the attacks of September 11th and determined what response we'd engage. Declarations of the what's true have often been put forth by corrupt power-players who simply want to maintain their power. But that's not to say truth itself is to blame or is indeed nonexistent. Just because untrue things can be declared as true, doesn't mean truth itself is nothing but cynical deception.

Nonetheless, this cynicism has definitely won the day. Post-modernism, it is called, though a highly contested term, one likened to a Swiss army knife. Louis Menand explained it as such a

useful tool, since as a critical concept it is “definitionally overloaded, and it can do almost any job you need done.”

Trying harder to define it, you could say, as several people quoted on the Wikipedia page of it said, that postmodernism is to “refer to a variety of artistic, cultural, and philosophical movements that claim to mark a break from modernism.” They “share an attitude of skepticism towards grand explanations and established ways of doing things,” sharing also “the conviction that it is no longer possible to rely upon previous ways of depicting the world.”

Of these now postmodernisms (plural, of course, because to claim postmodernism is a unified movement is to be hopelessly un-postmodern), one critic explained, “If there is a common denominator to all...it is that of a crisis in representation: a deeply felt loss of faith in our ability to represent the real, in the widest sense.” In short, the signifier has come detached from that which is meant to be signified. The signs no longer point to a fixed, shared reality. Words no longer hold stable meaning while images are as easily fabricated as they are to be trusted as representing the actual.

The surprising thing about it all is that postmodernism started on the academic left. French philosophers, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, were among the first to assert, and in such smart rhetoric, that there is no fixed truth, there are only assertions of power. But it made a surprising jump, quite recently a jump to the populist right, as heard in the ravings of Alex Jones and his cruel instance on crisis actors and false flag operations, denying the reality of such horrifying events as the Sandy Hook massacre.

But postmodernism had once been a favorite whipping boy of the right, a reliable reason to condemn left-wing culture and politics, aesthetics and values. It was all too unmoored, the right-wing conservatives said. It was all too radical a departure from tradition, family values, intergenerational living, tight knit communities.

Yet here, now, it was taking hold on the right, among right-wing populists with their alternative facts and online communities, people totally dislodged from their lived context and interpersonal moorings. A small cadre of writers has even begun tracing that leap. Headed up by *Commonweal Magazine*'s Matthew McManus, they're calling out conservative postmodernism, a realm where lies boldly told eviscerate old power centers, where truth is whatever the most aggressive voice says it is, and where fighting for this truth is the reason to wake up in the morning, to log on in the morning. Pull up your chair. Your computer screen is glowing and your followers await, readying themselves for a fight.

See, from the left to the right, the eschewing of truth has been like when wild fire jumps across highways, the air itself as kindling.

“What is truth?” Pontius Pilate asked, an early adopter of postmodernism, turns out, an early adopter of the cynicism that corrodes all things enduring, all things beautiful: all things once solid now melted into air.

Pilate said this while wondering, it seems, why he’d be made to crucify this man standing before him. He’d done nothing wrong, this man. He hadn’t even committed the capital crime of sedition, claiming to be the king when there was already a king. These were fighting words, of course, and this man wasn’t fighting, as neither were any who’d come to follow him, as neither do I much want to anymore.

This is the last Sunday of the church year. It Christ the King Sunday, or if you prefer the Reign of Christ Sunday. It’s not so long-standing a liturgical feast day. Instituted in 1925, this was the subversive idea of Pope Pius XI, living in Rome while Fascism gained foothold all around him and Communism was the growing beast in the east. And it could be supposed this was one last gasp of the historic church struggling to retain power while new rivals were gathering themselves for a fight, one that would turn out to be the deadliest one in human history. It could be cynically supposed this was one more trans-national power-grab: *Christ* is king. *Our* guy rules!

But there’s another way to hear it.

Come into the room.

Come into the room where Jesus and Pilate stood, where they shared an encounter, perceiving one another as people, two people at an impasse—Pilate struggling amidst the clash of abstracted power, Jesus standing as the abiding presence of the eternal God, the Alpha and the Omega, the One who will endure from end to end, from pole to pole, the One into whose enduring we set out lives that we too might endure, our living might be made light with God’s eternal translucence and knowing love.

We were told this last election season to fight, from all sides to fight. Here, we enter a room of encounter rather than struggle, of faithful enduring rather than fighting. Here we enter that we ourselves together might be felt as the truth, God’s truth embodied as truth can only be, not abstract but embodied, lived.

See and be seen in such loving light.

Thanks be to God.