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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
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“When the end is just the beginning”

John 18:33-37 | *Read the scripture online* <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=221048533>

Commencement addresses often assure us that the end is just the beginning. As the door closes on one chapter of education, of one era in life, the commencement exercises ritualize the beginning of the next. A degree earned leads to wisdom and opportunity, and a bright future on the horizon. The wide road opens before you. You've only just begun...

We all know this feeling in some small or large way from our own lives, whether we've earned a degree or not: the end of singleness means the beginning of a covenantal relationship; the end of a pregnancy means the beginning of parenthood; the end of renting means the beginning of homeownership. Life is full of rich beginnings, marked by the end of something else.

In June of 1963 President John F. Kennedy offered the commencement address at American University in Washington, D.C. To these students about to step out into the world in the midst of racial tensions and war marked by both combat and by cold-shouldered threat, the emphasis on his address that day was peace. He said: “I have chosen this time and this place to discuss a topic on which ignorance too often abounds and the truth is too rarely perceived, yet it is the most important topic on earth: world peace. I am talking about genuine peace, the kind of peace that makes life on earth worth living, the kind that enables men and nations to grow and to hope and to build a better life for their children—not merely peace for Americans but peace for all men and women; not merely peace in our time but peace for all time. I speak of peace, therefore, as the necessary rational end of rational men (and women). I realize that the pursuit of peace is not as dramatic as the pursuit of war, and frequently the words of the pursuer fall on deaf ears. But we have no more urgent task.”¹

Just a few short months later, on November 22, 1963, Kennedy himself was assassinated, shot to death as his motorcade drove through Dallas, TX, one sunny afternoon. And 49 years ago today, he was laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery. Kennedy's call for peace is as timely now as it was decades ago, as news headlines of our day tell the stories: of missile launchings and fragile cease-fires; of protests outside of Wal-Marts and protests throughout Cairo; of Black Friday mobs and the looming fiscal cliff. The truth is before us: we, too, are desperately in need of some peace. Peace in our hearts; peace in our homes; peace in our schools; peace in our neighborhoods; peace in our church; peace in this world; peace for all time.

And then the lectionary hands us this Gospel reading.

We feel full this Sunday: filled with good food, an extra day off of work, some time with family and friends. The Giving Tree in the Highland Ave entrance and the devotional materials on the table in the hallway are signs to us: we are ready now for Advent. With the luxury of a long weekend, we may even have our Christmas trees up, and wreaths pulled out from the attic. We've started our Christmas shopping, and maybe even finished our shopping. And we've seen the first snow flurries of the winter, pulling out our winter coats and hats, and maybe we even caught one of the Frosty the Snowman



Christmas specials on TV. We're ready to head into a season of peace, to herald the coming of the Prince of Peace into this world. We want to mark that something different is happening, that there is hope in this little baby born in a manger. We want to let bygones be bygones, to be our best selves, to dig into the spirit of joy and love and light of this season. And then the lectionary hands us this Gospel reading.

We are propelled by this text into Pilate's headquarters, the scene of a trial. What's worse, despite Pilate's words declaring Jesus' innocence, we already know the verdict. Sure, there is talk of truth and even a glimmer that Pilate himself is seeking to know the truth in all of its nuances. But we know how the story ends. Not with justice. Not with the victory of truth. Pilate washes his hands of the whole situation, and hands Jesus over to be killed.

This is the story of Holy Week. This is the story of the solemnity of Maundy Thursday, after Jesus' arrest in the garden. This is the story that should be told as the chancel is stripped of its paraments, as the organ is silenced through Good Friday and Holy Saturday. This is a story that takes us down the road to the cross. This is not a story we should hear just two days before the hanging of the greens!

Or is it?

As misplaced as this story may seem in the narrative of our lives, there is a profound resonance to hearing this story on the last Sunday of our liturgical year. This is the Sunday known as Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday. And no matter what the music on the radio tries to tell us, we do need to stop and remember that it is not Christmas yet. And so before we begin another liturgical year, we have an opportunity to pause at the ending of this one to put the story of our faith into a little perspective. This story takes us from prophets to prophetic visions; from an awareness of ancient troubles to the anticipation of future glory. It takes us to a manger in Bethlehem, and the adoring gaze of an unwed teen mother, her loyal fiancée and some frantic shepherds. It takes us out to sea and atop mountains, to feasts on green grass and in upper rooms. It takes us through friendship and betrayal; it takes us to the servanthood of foot-washing and the servanthood of dying to set others free.

This is the story of our lives, too: of love and hope, and brokenness and despair. It is the story of how we are a part of something much bigger than ourselves. It is the story of how we, through Christ, have earned a place at the dinner table, members of God's good family, bearing a family resemblance of the one who, in love, made, redeemed and sustains us each day. It is the story of how even when we experience defeat in our lives and conflict in our relationships, the end of the story is not written by us alone. The end was written long ago by the one who was and is and is to come. It is the story of how God's resurrection, life-giving power ensures that every ending will eventually lead to a new beginning, enfolded by God's love.

We, in our lives, experience Pilate moments when we ask of ourselves and of God: "What is truth?" We find ourselves as judge and jury in situations that seem way over our heads. We are asked to say how we can believe in a creative God and also believe in the science of evolution. We are asked to say why we believe in a redeemer when it is clear that there is so much brokenness all around us. We are asked to declare how we can be members in a denomination in which there is still so much conflict, rather than the unity and love to which the scriptures call us. We are asked to speak to how we can still have faith on the days when loved ones get bad diagnoses or we cannot pay



our bills. We are asked to articulate our faith in this particular God, even as we honor the beauty of other religions. We are continually asked to answer for ourselves and for others the question: “What is truth?”

Moment-by-moment, our “truth filters” are on: as we recover from the political rhetoric of the campaign season, as we search for the best deals, as we listen to differing accounts of headline news stories; as we hear the plea for forgiveness of an estranged loved one, as we put our best foot forward in a job interview, as we write those year-end greetings tucked inside our Christmas cards. Like Pilate, we have the exhausting job of trying to sift through the powers of this world that pull on our coat-sleeves and command our attention and somehow shift our gaze to the kingdom of which Jesus speaks—that is not of this world, but that still comes to bear on the reality of our daily lives, here and now.

The feast of Christ the King gives us an opportunity to pause and do just that. Even with our discomfort with the language of kingship, of the implications of domination, the vestiges of sexism, the kingdoms of this world it evokes, it edifies us and this world to stop and acknowledge: even for just this day that we are not in charge. Our perspective on life is a healthier one if we pause to step out of the mayhem of the reindeer games of this world and try to see things from the perspective of our faith, where we acknowledge the reign of Jesus Christ: the one who comes to usher into this world and into our lives a kingdom of peace, of justice, of joy and of love.

The kingdom of God in Christ is a kingdom that Jesus has ushered into this world through his words and deeds, through his life and his death and his resurrection from the grave. And we celebrate that, while this kingdom is real and present, we wait in joyful hope for the fullness of this kingdom to arrive in our midst.

The kingdom of God is that which is glimpsed in the life of a God who took on flesh in Jesus: a kingdom of radical reversals where the outcast are included, the oppressed are freed, the sick and broken are made whole, the ignored are prioritized; where the boundary lines are broken down so that all are welcomed, all are valued, all are made whole!

The kingship of Christ is not about dominance but about servanthood; it is not about conquest but about conquering that which harms; it is not about exclusion but about radical hospitality. See! It is a different realm altogether!

A commentator writes: “Inasmuch as today is Christ the King Sunday, please note that it is ‘Christ the King under arrest and being interrogated Sunday’; it is Christ the King being held hostage Sunday. It is Christ the royal political prisoner Sunday. It is Christ the King soon to be beaten down and crucified Sunday. It is Christ the innocent King/Victim Sunday. It is not Christ the powerful King Sunday. It is not Christ the mighty warrior Sunday. It is not Christ the King as Lawgiver and dispenser of punishment Sunday. It is Christ, whose kingdom is not of this world, the King Sunday.”²

The celebration of this truth is not one that should merely mark the end of a liturgical year. The Reign of Christ should not be a paradigm that serves as a tidy bookend of a church calendar: the image of Christ enthroned in heaven, juxtaposed against the image of Jesus as an infant in a manger. Rather, the lesson of this ending should infuse our new beginning; should set the tone for the Advent season; should, in fact, set the stage for the decisions we make each day.



See, we gather not just to worship a God who is far away. And we strive not only for a kingdom that is to come. We have an opportunity to celebrate that the kingdom of God has broken into this world in and through Jesus. We have an opportunity to choose to follow the truth of Christ's love and mercy and peace in our daily lives, here and now. We have an opportunity to profess our faith in a God whose kingdom is grounded in servanthood and grace, and to choose to live our lives by the principles of that kingdom, rather than bowing before the values of greed and consumption and individualism that clamor for our attention each day.

The end of this liturgical year is just the beginning. We celebrate that we worship a God who has rewritten all of our endings with the promise of peace, and love and new life: not just for us, but for all. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

¹ <http://www.humanity.org/voices/commencements/john.f.kennedy-american-university-speech-1963>

² www.textweek.com<<http://www.textweek.com/>> -- Gospel Anthropological Reading

