

Sermon: A & Ω

New North Church, Hingham

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25 November 2018

Based on **Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37**

Today's passage from Revelation seems like a continuation of last week's discussion about the eternal nature of God, the Alpha and the Omega. It also tells us quite a bit about Jesus Christ. The reading from John's Gospel is part of a larger section about Jesus' trial, conviction, and crucifixion, but this piece focuses only on one thing: the truth. It's similar to a painting composed in such a way that your eye is always drawn to one single point on the canvas.

The Book of Revelation, in Greek, simply 'Apocalypse,' happens to be the last book in Christian Scripture, and we don't often read from it in a church setting. Our daughter Kate once read portions of it at home, when she was about eleven. It raised some interesting questions for her.

Anyway, it is an unusual book. It is really a letter written to seven churches by an exiled prophet named John, not the evangelist John who wrote our Gospel passage. It's a subversive little book that boldly declares that God rules all with the implication that earthly rulers do not, despite what they might think about it. This could be why John was writing *in exile*. And what John wrote was the heavenly vision given to him which he uses to reassure the faith community that God has already won the war with a few battles left to fight. Those communities were anxiously waiting for Christ's return, thinking it would be very soon. God's ultimate triumph meant, for them, the end of persecution.

Martin Luther thought Revelation was a dangerous book. Throughout history, theologians have warned against taking it literally, though we must take it seriously. It was written in a particular time and place to help specific Christians to live in trust and hope in a God who stands with the oppressed and suffering.

Which brings us to the Gospel. Pilate wants to know two things about Jesus. He asks, 'Are you the King of the Jews,' and follows up with 'What have you done?' Pilate really knows nothing about Jesus, but he suspects he is being railroaded.

The way Pilate asks the question might be John's way of reminding us that Jesus has done plenty: he has healed people, fed them, taught them a new Way, and revealed truth to them. When Pilate talks about truth, it becomes apparent that he and Jesus are talking about two different things.

Jesus said, 'Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice,' an open invitation to Pilate, who refused to accept it either through fear or ignorance, because the next words out of his mouth were, 'What is truth?'

For Pilate, truth was intellectual; it could be measured. Truth made sense and gave order to the world. Truth was the Roman Empire. For Jesus, truth was revelation, as when he met the Samaritan woman at the well and told her everything about herself. Jesus' truth leads to faithful living and seeking to know God. Pilate seems stuck in the middle. He needs to maintain order and control but he's not sure that condemning an innocent man is the way to it. Maybe that's why the Gospel writers go easy on him.

On this Sunday, the church proclaims Christ the King. The Book of Revelation declares Jesus the ruler of the kings of the earth. The Roman emperor saw it differently, as did every totalitarian dictator throughout history. Authoritarian systems become blind to the world and ultimately to God.

Within living memory – barely – we've seen this happen in Nazi Germany. In the early 1930s, the government enabled an anti-Semitic and racist group called the German Christians to corrupt the German Protestant churches with Nazi ideology and made them subservient to the state. No First Amendment there.

The 1934 Theological Declaration of Barmen, which is the name of a town, rejected the subordination of the Church to the state and the subordination of the Word and Spirit to the Church. One of the Declaration's lead authors, Karl Barth, personally mailed a copy to Hitler. Barth refused to sign a loyalty oath and was forced to resign his professorship at the University of Bonn. He was able to return to his native Switzerland.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was another founder of this resistance movement. He was very vocal and was eventually arrested, in 1943. He died by hanging at the very end of the war, on April 9, 1945.

Did Jesus know how much paranoia and fear his life and ministry would stir up? Proclaiming Christ the King is as subversive an act as anyone can undertake.

God is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and last. Everything begins with and ends with God. John the exile makes this clear in his letter.

He is also clear about who Jesus is: the faithful witness, firstborn of the dead, and king of kings. John is equally clear about what Jesus has done for us: he loves us in the present and freed us from our sins in the past. He has made us to be a kingdom of priests, that is to serve God.

In John the evangelist's Gospel, Jesus makes us an offer. To accept it means facing the truth about our lives, something Pilate couldn't do. But it is Jesus who helps us see and face the truth about ourselves, our faith, and the world in which we live.

Declaring Christ the King and the ruler of the kings of the earth frees us from the competitive urges of one king over another, and the conflict that that sort of competition often brings with it. Making such a proclamation is challenging enough for a free people but is extremely dangerous for those living under oppression. And yet, people do it. They find a way to live their faith and stay alive at the same time.

Scripture tells us that the Alpha and Omega, the one who is, who was, and who is to come is personified in Jesus Christ. That's truth. Truth is also the power of God to transform and make all things new. God's power can make even sinners into 'a kingdom of priests.' The truth embodied by Jesus is found in God's eternal grace and love. We nurture it in our private and communal prayers, in our worship, and in our fellowship. Listen for its voice. Be alert. Walk in God's truth from the beginning to the end.

Amen.