

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church
Reign of Christ Sunday

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Revelation 1:4-6
John 18:33-38a

NOT FROM HERE

You could call him a terrorist. And yet, he was a bit different from what we generally think of when we hear the ‘t’ word, for he was part of the established power structure. He was one who helped to maintain a reign of terror. That’s how the Roman Empire stayed in power at that time, and power, along with the wealth to which it led, was the purpose of their reign. We hear a very small part of the story of Pontius Pilate in our gospel account today, where he is carrying out one of his duties as a judge. As the Roman governor of Judea, where he ruled for a period of ten years, his primary duties were to make sure that Roman taxes were collected and that order in the region was maintained. A particular emphasis was utterly squashing any rebellions that began to arise. Pilate had at his command the Roman army troops in the province, which he used to protect himself and to enforce Roman rule.

A contemporary of Pilate’s, a Jewish philosopher named Philo, who lived in Alexandria, described the Roman prefect’s personality saying that Pilate had a “vindictive and furious temper,” and was “naturally inflexible, a blend of self-will and relentlessness.” He described the governor’s conduct as consisting of “briberies, insults, robberies, outrages and wanton injuries, executions without trial, along with ceaseless and supremely grievous cruelty.”¹ Anyone want to invite him over for Thanksgiving dinner?

I don’t think of the man as blood-thirsty, but he was certainly power-hungry, and as such, he was willing to spill a lot of blood to maintain his base of power. Those who resisted Roman rule were put to death in a torturous and humiliating way on a cross, with the gruesome executions being carried out publicly so that they would serve as a deterrent to future resistance. These dreadful expressions of capital punishment were a rather ordinary practice in Roman-occupied Palestine. Fear and intimidation were the common weapons that Pilate used, which is why I consider him a terrorist.

Any benefit that came to those who lived under Roman rule was not as result of a governing goal, but as something that would make it easier to appease a restless occupied people and allow the Roman exercise of power to continue. So a certain amount of religious freedom was allowed, not for the benefit of the Hebrew people, but to relieve the number of complaints Roman rulers would have to endure.

It was in this context that Jesus was asked by Pilate whether he was a king. He had been arrested the night before in the Garden of Gethsemane by the temple police. He was questioned through the night by the high priest, who felt uneasy about the crowds of followers that Jesus had. He thought that some of what Jesus had said in public could be considered blasphemous. According to John’s Gospel, he and other Hebrew religious leaders wanted the Romans to take care of the problem Jesus presented. They turned him over to Pontius Pilate charging that he had made treasonous claims of being a ruler.

So that’s where this conversation between Pilate and Jesus begins. Jesus is on trial – what he says could get him killed. It would be a frightening position for anyone. And yet Jesus does not abandon his principles or mission as he responds to Pilate’s questions. He is not a king in the way that Pilate understood the concept, but Jesus speaks of his kingdom that is not from this world. He knew that earthly kingdoms tended to be focused on their own needs, but his reign focused on the needs of others. Earthly kingdoms tended to serve whatever path toward power they could find, but his reign was about empowering others, not himself. Earthly kingdoms frequently

used the threat of taking life away, but Jesus' reign was focused on providing a life so full of meaning and love that it would be described as abundant living.

We find ourselves once again in a time when terror and fear are being used as a means to grab power. There are those who evoke fear through horrendous acts. There are others who stoke fear of others by their words and then allow their proposals for so-called leadership to be shaped by the panicky desires of a public that is frightened of even the victims of terrorism that would seek to come here as refugees. Neither terrorists, nor those I will call fear-ists have the overall well-being of others in mind, only their own ascent to power.

In total contrast, the reign that Jesus was bringing was so shaped by love that fear had little effect on it. He knew that living out that love would put him at risk, but he went on loving. C.S. Lewis, in describing the kind of love at the core of Jesus' reign wrote this: "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable."² The One whose reign we proclaim this day is one who would rather be put in a tomb than to have his love put in a casket. He was filled with love and compassion even for those whose actions would lead to his execution.

To be vulnerable is a scary thought. And yet, to try to live in a way where we are invulnerable is far from the abundant living at the core of Jesus' way of living and dying. I think it is o.k. for people of faith to be afraid, but it is not o.k. for people of faith to be ruled by fear. As a poet once wrote, "Courage is fear that has said its prayers."³ On Christmas Eve, 1951, was the first telecast of an opera named "Amahl and the Night Visitors." It tells of a boy and his mother who lived near Bethlehem, who provided housing for three magi who were following a star in search of one who was born to a new kind of reign. In it, one of the magi sings these words, "The Child we seek doesn't need our gold. On love, on love alone He will build His Kingdom. His pierced hand will hold no scepter. His haloed head will wear no crown. His might will not be built on your toil. Swifter than lightning He will soon walk among us. He will bring us new life and receive our death, and the keys to His city belong to the poor."⁴

Friends, this is the One whose reign we proclaim. His ways do not reflect the methodology or goals of most world powers. But we find his ways compelling, holding a power to transform this world and us. We live in hope that instead of fear, his way of love and compassion will reign in our hearts and in our lives.

¹ Philo, On The Embassy of Gaius, Book XXXVIII, 299–305, referred to in https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pontius_Pilate

² C. S. Lewis, The Four Loves, published by Geoffrey Bles, 1960.

³ From the poem, "Courage" by Karle Wilson Baker, published in Poetry magazine in October, 1921.

⁴ Gian Carlo Menotti, Amahl and the Night Visitors, 1951.