

"Game of Thrones"
A Sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – November 21, 2021

Please Read:
Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14
John 18:33-37

About this time of year a few years ago, Kim and I would don our winter clothes and enjoy long walks around the city of Paris. She has a hat that reads, "Winter Is Coming," and we noticed people would stop to say they liked her hat. We didn't understand why her hat was so popular until our youngest son Matthew explained to us that "Winter Is Coming" was the name of the first episode in the now famous "Game of Thrones" HBO series. If you haven't seen it, the TV series is a depiction of American author George R. R. Martin's book "A Game of Thrones," a medieval fantasy epic about power. It tells the fictional and violent story of two powerful families -- kings and queens, knights and renegades, liars, and honest men -- playing a deadly game for control of the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros, a story about who will sit atop the Iron Throne!

On this final Sunday of the Church Calendar called "Christ the King" Sunday, and as we prepare to walk forward with our pledges for the coming year, I want to suggest that we are all playing a game of thrones, in a way. We are all engaged in small and epic decisions about who and what will control our lives, and what we will do with the power in our lives. It's been said that Americans don't understand what it means to have a King, but I say just the opposite. We have a very good understanding of what a King is, and that's why we revolted against old King George back in 1776. A King demands loyalty and allegiance. Those who wanted to rebel against the King wrote in the Declaration of Independence, that "We Mutually Pledge To Each Other Our Lives, Our Fortunes And Our Sacred Honor."

Today, we honor Jesus as King, and as disturbing or disorienting as that may be to our 21st century colonial and patriarchal sensibilities, the point is clear. At the end of Matthew's gospel Jesus declares, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me..." Jesus will be revealed ultimately (as we sing in Handel's Hallelujah chorus) *And he shall reign forever and ever: King of Kings, and Lord of Lords...* The question is, what does that claim mean today, when we see the love of power, not the power of love, dominating the news and world stage? What kind of King is Jesus, really? And what is the evidence for Jesus' reign, for the presence and power of the Prince of Peace in our lives and world today?

Today's Gospel reading is a trial scene, the trial of Jesus by Pilate. Jesus has been dragged before Pilate, the man who is in charge of the Roman occupation forces in Judea. The trial is supposed to be a scene in which a bedraggled, powerless, poor, itinerate rabbi named Jesus stands trembling before the man who represents all of the military power and *pax romana* domination of Imperial Rome.

Yet scarcely has the trial begun before we realize that this trial is not going the way we expected. There is Pilate, jumping around all over the place, moving back and forth seven times from one room to the next, Pilate biting his nails, uncertain, inept, frightened of the crowd outside, indecisive.

"Are you the king of the Jews?" Pilate asks Jesus. Surely Pilate's question is meant to be sarcastic. The Jews are a captive people. They have no army. And remember, this is the time of the Passover, the festival which celebrates the Jewish liberation from their Egyptian oppressors. Pilate stands there, backed up by a huge Roman occupation force. Pilate looks at this forlorn, whipped, and bleeding Jew and asks with thick irony, "Are you king?"

Jesus responds, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" And we think the tables may be turning. Is this something you thought up yourself, Pilate, or only a rumor, the report of your latest public opinion poll?

Again, there is a question followed by Jesus' flat assertion: "My kingdom is not from this world." And we are beginning to get the point of this courtroom drama. The kingdoms of this world depend upon armies, violence and domination for their power. There's no way around that. But Jesus says, "My kingdom is not from here." And it really isn't.

Jesus the defendant has become Jesus the Prosecutor. Pilate the judge has become Pilate the defendant, standing sheepishly before Jesus the judge. Tom Long puts the matter eloquently:

"Every statement shows Pilate more and more confounded by this mysterious presence. Pilate is no poised diplomat; he is a ping-pong ball slapped back and forth between his public fears and his inner doubts. He pleads, he bullies, he begs, he vacillates, and finally he folds: 'Then he handed Jesus over to them to be crucified.' The irony is clear: It is Jesus who is to be crucified, but it is Pilate and all like him who are defeated. It is Jesus who will suffer death, but it is the world that is perishing."¹

John is offering here a critique of worldly power, about the fragility and the illegitimacy of our kingdoms built on violence and domination. An assault is being made upon our definitions of power and glory. And I think John is depicting the way in which, by the end of the trial, the glory of God breaks through and we are let in on the real truth of things, the "deeper magic."

There is a story of the tender-hearted young boy who liked to walk on mountain trails with his friend, an old monk. One day, the boy stopped still, staring at a butterfly on a bush blazing in the sunlight. He cried out, "O, Father, I see God in that bush!" The monk smiled at the boy, looked all around, and said, "I do not see anything that is not of God."

I think Jesus had eyes like that old monk. Jesus said he was not of this world but belonged to another world. He called it the Kingdom of God, but another way of talking about it is the *kin*-dom of God. Kin, as in family. We are all called beloved children of God, we are kin to Jesus, and he claims us as his own. And this kin-dom is a reality blazing with eternal truth. When pressed on whether he was a king or not, Jesus spoke of this alternate reality.

¹ Tom Long, *Whispering the Lyrics*, 1995, p. 77.

The truth of belonging and living from another reality is what gave Jesus a different way of being. It was undoubtedly the key to his abundant compassion, capacity for healing, and non-violence. The beauty of God's goodness, the truth of God's hope, the possibilities of God's transforming love is the core value of his kin-dom...

In a day when the courtroom scenes of our country exonerate teenagers with AR15s killing others, even in self-defense, betrays the values of our world. The fact that it is OK to carry assault weapons in public at all should be a clue that there is something very wrong with the values of our society. And when vigilantes have the nerve to chase a black man jogging down the street and kill him in cold blood, it betrays the injustice of our world. We are arguing about whether or not to spend money on helping to lift up the poor of our country, but no one seems to be arguing about a military budget that is larger than the military budgets of the next 14 strongest countries combined! We can't even approach the Thanksgiving holiday without being reminded of the violence that lurks around even our most sacred histories.

So today, we need to hear again the good news, in spite of the attempts of the world to kill it, *Jesus' self-giving love is ultimate power* and there is no corner of creation immune from his rule. No power on this earth is greater than God's love. As Paul puts it, nothing in heaven and earth can separate us from the love of God which is ours in Christ Jesus. Nothing! Luther wrote, "the body they may kill, but his truth abideth still: His kingdom is forever!"

But here proclamation in word alone is not enough. For those who are victimized by the kingdoms of this world, there is a need for clear action, for activist testimony to the inbreaking of God's Kingdom, that justice is what love looks like in public! We pray "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." *Thy will* is all about loving our neighbors, even our enemies.

In our Bible study this morning we talked about the verb "othering." It's a phrase that's used to indicate how language can put people outside of our circle of welcome and inclusion. We "other" people who are different and with whom we disagree. Republicans "other" Democrats and Democrats "other" Republicans. White's "other" people of color, and people of color "other" whites. We have been othering people for centuries and we often do it without thinking. With Jesus as our King, however, we are invited to see all people as our kin. We are invited to see all people as siblings, all created in the image of God and beloved of God. And Christ our King invites us to love the others in our lives. No exceptions. In between now and the time when Jesus will consummate his Kingdom, God calls the church to proclaim in all of life, sometimes against all odds, the supremacy of Jesus' love.

That's why we are making a pledge here today. Our Kingdom, our Kin-dom, is not of this world. I hope with grateful hearts for our many blessings and our kinship with the King of love, we are promising to invest in this other worldly vision of the way it's supposed to be and pursue a better life and a fairer world for all people. All.

Make no mistake about it. Winter is coming, and we are playing a game of thrones. The question is, who will rule in our hearts? The King of Love invites us to crown him Lord in our hearts, so that

his love will prevail in and through us for all the world. The status quo dealers of power and might will never understand, and they may even take everything from you sooner or later. Just remember, our King has been there... and back. Our King has chosen you first to live into his counter-cultural Kin-dom of grace, love and mercy. It is God's Kin-dom of heaven that is forever and ever.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

In response to the good news, let us stand and say what we believe....