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AS THE DAY APPROACHES
Nov 14, 2021 Pentecost 25 B Reign of Christ

I've seen in the news the last few weeks that those who rushed the Congressional building on Jan 6 riots are now being taken to trial. It's taken a while! Did you know that many of those who participated have been turned in by their spouses? True. I'm preaching about the Reign of Christ today because many Christ-followers have totally misunderstood the Reign of Christ that we celebrate today. They've fallen afoul of the imagery of King and Kingdom by taking the imagery of this spiritual realm literally and physically, and think of Christ's reign and Christ's position like an **earthly** Kings and Kingdom - with physical battles, physically fighting to bring in their version of Christ's realm, and in taking over political seats in order to use that power to make everyone live by the specific standards and specific interpretation of faith. I was going to give examples, but you all know what some of the issues are, that certain Christians are trying to install as law in our country. We can see this kind of takeover of government by religious factions in places like Afghanistan, where a certain extremist faction of Islam have taken over the government - and look at the people that fled that!

Of course, Jesus' disciples had the same misconception, at least before he was crucified and raised..... While they walked with Jesus on earth, they also seemed to be imagining a political victory and physical fighting. I imagine it was pretty difficult to imagine what Jesus was really saying and teaching, I have to admit..... Everyone wants to be on top and win....it's very seductive to think of words we say in faith about power and glory, kingship and kingdom stretching from sea to sea. The trouble is that to talk about spiritual things, we still just have human words - words to which we attach meanings in the physical & political realm.

Jesus, however, had no use for the weapons of his day - the sword, chariots and such. When Jesus came into Jerusalem in the week he was crucified, the event that we celebrate as Palm Sunday, he didn't come in like an earthy king - on a white stallion, on a red carpet, and at the head of companies of fighting men (or like Aladdin in the Disney movies) - No, Jesus' entrance to the city was a total opposite of that - he came in on a donkey, and the cheering people waved palm branches and threw down their own coats for the donkey to walk on. JESUS knew what kind of "king" he was, and what his "kingdom" consisted of. Writers in the Scriptures show us a picture of Jesus as a person of non-violence, the Prince of Peace. In the Hebrew Scriptures, it is said of this coming Messiah that he won't even break a bruised reed - something easy to break, already injured.

Because so many throughout history and especially today advocate for Christianity in a militant stance, I try to avoid these kinds of images that lend themselves so easily to misunderstanding. We Christ-followers need to erase those kinds of pictures from our minds and imaginations - Jesus never used force. In fact, when Jesus was praying prior to his death, his follower Peter evidently defended Jesus by pulling a sword and cutting off the ear of a soldier sent to arrest Jesus. You'd think this was a noble effort to defend Jesus.... No, Jesus healed the soldier, said that people who live by the sword will die by the sword, and went on with the soldiers to his arrest, trial, and eventual killing. He went like a lamb before his slayers, submitting to this injustice, these lies talk of him, this hatred of people who cried "crucify him" because he failed to fulfill their hopes of an uprising that would free them - in their point of view. That people's expectation was mistaken doesn't even make Jesus do anything violent. No, he bore it all as fulfilling his work. Jesus is a savior that endured all that we could throw; and in that suffering, he brought a new vision of hope and life based on love and peace.

Not that Jesus didn't want things to change here on earth - and not to say Jesus' message about his own kingdom ran totally counter to our human establishments and kingdoms. It's not that Jesus didn't want to confront the evils of treating people badly, of hierarchical thinking that some are better than others, of persecuting those who are different, and so on. In fact, Jesus advocated and taught about a whole different level of human interaction - one based on love for God, compassion for one another, humility, and service. Jesus' message directly confronted the way things are usually done. The difference is that Jesus advocated ways of peace to bring about this new realm, not the violence of the old ways. Jesus chose the high road of compassion and service, teaching and calling people to join with him; Jesus was willing to endure the violence of the world's ways in order to show it as wrong, and manifest the way of God. Jesus' followers are called to live the same way.

There are others who have practiced non-violence - Gandhi in India,, Martin Luther King Jr & Rosa Parks for civil rights, Saul Alinsky in working with unions, Harvey Milk and others in the struggle for LGPTQ rights, Nelson Mandela in South Africa, Mairead Maguire in Ireland - those are but a few. The Buddha, who we read about in our world religions class last week, was another non-violent leader. Not that these folks were passive about issues of peace, rights, freedom, and human dignity - non-violent doesn't mean passive - it means they found other strategies to advocate for their deeply held beliefs, and to change the ways society functions - but no means that physically damaged others, none that adopted the ways of the ones they were protesting. Part of the theory in non-violence is that the oppressors are being damaged by their belief system, too, and ALL need to move into a more just relationship. In those famous

photographs of protestors being sprayed with fire hoses in Birmingham, the violence of the oppressors was portrayed for the world to see. Those pictures had a huge influence on the rest of the country on behalf of civil rights.

We might use the term “King” about Jesus in terms of how Jesus is and will be the most greatly praised in this realm God is establishing; Jesus will be the name above all names, and sit above all others. But Jesus is not a king like earthly kings; Jesus is raised in glory because he was obedient to God in suffering, and was made perfect in his endurance. Jesus opened the way of restoration for us to God not through military might, but by compassion for our condition, by a love for us that moved him. Jesus is the prime example of that great reversal, where the last is made first, the hungry are fed and the rich go away empty, the poor are lifted up, sorrow is turned to joy, the mighty are broken and the feeble girded with strength.

We might use the term “kingdom” as an image for Christ’s realm, but it is a spiritual realm, a spiritual kingdom, a “kindom” of those brought into Christ’s body, made one family or kin throughout all the earth. God’s realm not a political or national kingdom, it has no physical boundaries to defend or expand; there is no determined # refugees allowed...rather, all who believe are welcome; there is no force armed with literal weapons; rather Christ-followers who have learned the ways of love and peace.

Unfortunately, in the history of Christianity, there are many examples of those who misunderstood, and tried to make others convert at the point of a sword, or fought them literally in the name of Christ. Wanting to be the winner is so endemic to human cultures, wanting to be recognized as a great leader, expanding our tribe or nation, wanting to conquer other lands and bring them under our purview. When we come to Christianity and read words like King and Kingdom and Soldiers of the Lord putting on the full armor of God, resisting evil and such talk - we immediately use it to confirm our own bias - we don’t read deeply enough to hear that the words are being used in a metaphorical way, a spiritual way. Because it is so deeply a part of our worldly culture, it's hard to hear & accept that Jesus means something peaceful yet powerful, advocating for change through ways that don’t run counter to the whole message in the first place! Of course, none of us understand the gospel completely - we’re all always reforming and always growing - .yet the Spirit continues to teach us and lead us...

Jesus doesn’t give us very good hints about when these last days will arrive, when the realm of God will be revealed. I mean, nation fighting against nation, wars and rumors of wars - that could describe almost any era, right? Lots of Christ-followers want to try and predict when the “last days” are. I think the best thing to do is to use Jesus’ words about “today is the

acceptable time” to believe and let our lives be changed. Jesus also says to be ready, because we don’t know.....If we think we would do better if the time got closer, like procrastinators about term papers or reports due, the best answer to is do it NOW, change our lives now, do what Christ says NOW.

The text from Hebrews has some good suggestions for living in Christ’s realm in the end times or all times: consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds. My mom always used the word “provoke” in a bad sense, like we were provoking her anger at us. So it was interesting to see it used in a positive way! How can we provoke one another to do good deeds? To love more? To continue to meet together? To encourage one another? So it’s not just myself that needs these things; we can help other Christ-followers to do them, too. That’s a good word for us, especially in this time of a pandemic when folks are getting out of their habit of coming to worship, even online. We’re going to continue with being online, because not everyone is comfortable being back in person yet. I’m sure folks need encouragement in worshipping together. We can have drives for feeding ministries, campus ministries, youth outreach, clothing drives, supporting ongoing ministries of groups like the Salvation Army. All these ways of mission!

“The days are coming” will be a theme of Advent, too, which starts in 2 Sundays. Every day makes it closer, whenever it is. Be ready, Jesus says. We can do that all the time. AMEN.