

John 18:28-40

Narrator: They led Jesus then from Caiaphas to the Roman governor's palace. It was early morning. They themselves didn't enter the palace because they didn't want to be disqualified from eating the Passover. So Pilate came out to them and spoke.

Pilate: What charge do you bring against this man?

The crowd: If he hadn't been doing something evil, do you think we'd be here bothering you?"

Pilate: You take him. Judge him by *your* law.

The Crowd: We're not allowed to kill anyone.

Narrator: Pilate went back into the palace and called for Jesus.

Pilate: Are you the 'King of the Jews'?

Jesus: Are you saying this on your own, or did others tell you this about me?

Pilate: Do I look like a Jew? Your people and your high priests turned you over to me. What did you do?

Jesus: My kingdom doesn't consist of what you see around you. If it did, my followers would fight so that I wouldn't be handed over to the Jews. But I'm not that kind of king, not the world's kind of king.

Pilate: So, are you a king or not?

Jesus: You tell me. Because I am King, I was born and entered the world so that I could witness to the truth. Everyone who cares for truth, who has any feeling for the truth, recognizes my voice.

Pilate: What is truth?

Narrator: Then he went back out to the Jews and spoke to them

Pilate: I find nothing wrong in this man. It's your custom that I pardon one prisoner at Passover. Do you want me to pardon the 'King of the Jews'?

The crowd: Not this one, but Barabbas!

Narrator: Barabbas was a Jewish freedom fighter.

## **A Kingdom without Borders**

I had three heroes as a child. First was my Godfather, Johnny Bramblett, who was an army officer who served in a while in Vietnam; Cousin Johnny sent me some cool gifts – currency from South Vietnam, a jigsaw puzzle of the moon along with the Vanguard rocket ship, toy soldiers and planes. The second hero was my father who had served in the Pacific theater near the end of the Second World War; my dad gave me some of his old equipment – his utility belt and mess kit – to play with. He was the one who bought me my very first G.I. Joe action figure (because boys don't play with dolls; they play with *action figures!*). My third hero was George S. Patton; when I was nine years old the movie *Patton* came out, and for years I was buying model tanks and airplanes. Playing with all my army equipment and soldiers and planes and models I would imagine myself as a general leading soldiers into battle against an enemy. My three favorite heroes were military men, those who faced certain danger to defend their country.

When you think about it, you realize that our national heroes tend to be military men. Think George Washington, the man known as the father of our country. Think William Henry Harrison, Zachary Taylor, Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, Teddy Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, and John F. Kennedy. Our current President's favorite president is Andrew Jackson, the hero of the Battle of New Orleans. Other nations' heroes also tend to be military men. The people of Haiti recognize Toussaint Louverture as their national hero, who was also a military leader. Fidel Castro was a military hero in Cuba. General Charles De Gaulle would become the President of France. The current leader of North Korea, Kim Jong Eun, is the grandson of Kim Il Sung who was a military hero in Korea fighting Japanese occupation; it shouldn't confound us why the descendents of Kim Jong Il could actually be popular in the authoritarian regime of North Korea, because the Japanese occupation is still a recent memory for Koreans, and one thing that keeps the North Korean regime in power is the reminder of the military threat from other nations, particularly the United States. Military leaders are revered by people all over the world.

So it should not be a surprise to us that, in our reading for today, the crowd who chooses Barabbas over Jesus as the man that Pontius Pilate should release. Israel wanted a conventional messiah who used conventional (i.e. military) means to bring about the new Kingdom of Israel. Both before and after Jesus there were military leaders in Israel who were considered by many to be the Messiah; one of these, Simon Bar Kokhba, led a successful revolt against Rome in the year 132. Coins have been found celebrating the freedom of Jerusalem and dated the year two indicating that the people understood that a new age had begun. So we should be able to understand the sentiment of the crowd that asks for Barabbas' release and Jesus' crucifixion. We prefer leaders who can get things done swiftly and decisively by military means, by destroying our enemy rather than loving them, forgiving them, and praying for them. If, during the Revolutionary War, King George had captured George Washington and given Americans the choice of having Jesus released or Washington released, who do you think they would have chosen? Who do think we would choose today?

The truth is that as much as we admire Jesus and the ideals that he stands for, we're not so apt to put our support behind his platform – a platform that calls us to turn the other cheek, love our enemies, walk the extra mile, and forgive those who sin against us. We would rather fight those

who offend us and attack those who sin against us. Jesus' platform is simply not practical for the world that we're used to living in.

Which is why Jesus, as he stands before Pontius Pilate, explains that his kingdom is not of this world. Jesus' kingdom is not restricted to a nation or a tribe or a race or even a religion; **Jesus' kingdom is a kingdom without borders of any kind.** But we are a people of borders. We identify ourselves as American or Canadian or Mexican or Irish or British or Korean. And we are very patriotic; when someone says or does something that offends our nation, we fight for our nation. We protect our nation. And while we may form alliances and have peace treaties and be on good trading terms with other nations, it's questionable whether we'll ever be able to see people of other nations as our equals, to seek their well-being as zealously as we seek our own. We're more or less satisfied as long as we're the most powerful nation on earth, but if we lose that position to China or Russia or India, will we start to complain about unfair trade practices? If another nation's army becomes stronger than ours will we spend more on our military to reach #1 again? History has shown that humans are constantly trying to gain advantage over other humans. I received an email from my mom this week explaining all the privileges that are afforded to not only our congressional representatives and senators but to their children and families as well, and guess who voted to give them all these privileges? You guessed it; congressional representatives and senators. And as much as we can complain about the corruption in Washington, if we were elected we would be just as prone to give ourselves advantages over others. This is our nature, and as such, we are not likely to see such a wonderful kingdom as Jesus describes, a place of peace and justice, of love and compassion, a place where even death is defeated and life eternal.

This is why Jesus said that he will come again. He *must* come again if God's kingdom is to be fully established on earth as it is in heaven. Because it's not in our nature to live the way that Jesus teaches us to live. We are so driven by self-interest that we cannot hand power over to God who ironically is the one who knows best what we need as individuals and as a world. We prefer the Barabbases of this world who would smite those who oppress us, who would overcome our enemies by force to the Jesuses who would have us wash their feet. The best we can do without God's radical intervention is to have governments that impose laws to prevent our self interests from hurting other people and nations that seek non-aggression treaties with others to maintain some semblance of peace. And all we need to do is open the daily newspaper to find stories of people who take advantage of others, who want to assert that they somehow superior to others, nations that infringe on the sovereignty of other nations, who break the rules to gain advantage. Will these conflicts ever end? Only with the coming of Christ will the chaos finally end and a new order begin. Only when the world is purged of its evil will love finally prevail.

Which brings me back to the Church. Time and time again this institution called the Church and the people who call themselves Christian have failed to live according to the teachings of Jesus, even *justifying* their sins in the *name of Jesus*. The question we must constantly ask ourselves is whether we are truly seeking God's kingdom or our own kingdom. Jesus has told us that we are a light to the world; Bethel's motto is "A Beacon of Hope." I believe that as self-serving and violent and depraved the human race is, the Church is the greatest hope for this world. We as Christians must hold onto a vision of *God's* kingdom. We understand Jesus to be the first fruits of this new world that God is making. His resurrected body which overcame death and lives

eternally, and Jesus promises us that we will share in this resurrection. Hyesun preached about Ezekiel last Sunday at St. Paul's, and she spoke of the question that God asked Ezekiel when looking out at a field strewn with human bones; "Can these bones live again, O human?" "You know, Lord." The fact is that they can, through God's power. The same power that brought Jesus back will bring back God's people. This is our hope, the hope that sustains the vision of the church and the vision of the coming of God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. God can do it, and the Bible promises us that God *will* do it.

But just because it is beyond our ability to establish a kingdom of true love and peace and justice in this world doesn't mean that we should sit back and let the world go to pieces. The fact that the realization of that kingdom is not something that humans can accomplish should not be understood as an excuse to cop out, but rather as a reason for us to seek God's will with all our heart and mind and strength. What I see is that the *majority* of people will never bring themselves to fully follow Jesus Christ, but that doesn't mean that you or I *can't* or that we *shouldn't try*. Even though there are Christians who give up and other Christians who make excuses for their sins, there have always been those who hear Jesus' call, who seek God zealously, and respond to God faithfully. You can be that kind of Christian. While God's kingdom cannot be realized without God's radical intervention into human affairs, we can still strive toward living it out in our lives and in our communities.

And we should remember Matthew 25. Jesus will return and separate the sheep from the goats, and I don't want to be a goat. I rarely bring judgment and hell into my sermons, but I do sincerely wonder about people who spend their lives apart from Christ, seeking their own glory, working against peace, justice and righteousness. The Bible speaks of judgment and the sentence given to those who fail to love God and neighbor. I don't believe that God wants us to fear him so much as to love him, but I think those who don't truly know God's love and God's grace have plenty of reason to fear him. If we define hell as separation from God we can see that there are plenty of people who already experience hell in this life, but how horrible it would be to be separated from God for eternity.

So I conclude this worship series with a warning. May our nation aspire to be a nation that does what is pleasing in God's eyes. Let us also recognize that God's kingdom is a kingdom without borders. One day there will be no United States, no Great Britain, no Canada or Mexico or Russia or Korea. One day the earth will be ruled by Christ and Christ alone. And having Christ as our Lord means that we transcend national identity. As Christians we seek what is good for God, which means that we must treat all people, regardless of their citizenship status, with love, with respect, with justice and with righteousness.