SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON JENNIFER KING DAUGHERTY, ASSOCIATE TO THE RECTOR
THE FEAST OF CHRIST THE KING, NOVEMBER 25, 2018
DANIEL 7:9-10, 13-14; PSALM 93; REVELATION 1:4b-8; JOHN 18:33-37

ULTIMATE THINGS

John 18:33-37 *[Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."]*

The Feast of Christ the King has a pretty interesting history. It was made an observance of the church in 1925 by Pope Pius XI, who was concerned by the growing secularism and nationalism locally and abroad. He wanted to remind non-religious leaders -- especially dictators like Benito Mussolini -- that their authority was transitory, relative, and vulnerable. Corruption, denigration of the media, demonization of people with mixed heritage -- all these tactics might amass power in the short term, but ultimately, in the light of more lasting truths, they would fail.

The Feast of Christ the King points to ultimate authority and ultimate truth, which belong not to temporal things but to eternal things. In the gospel today, Jesus tells Pilate, "For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." That truth was summarized in the opening collect today: God's will is to restore all things, liberating people from what divides and enslaves them so that they

can be free and reunited in grace. We trust this restoration and liberation is embodied in Jesus Christ -- the one we follow in the "Way of Love."

In the long span of history, the political realities of the early 20th century were hardly unique. Just listen to the apocalyptic readings today from Daniel and Revelation, which were written for communities dealing with oppressive leaders and persecution of minority religious groups. The first reading comes from the Book of Daniel, the only full-blown apocalypse in the Old Testament. It was written in the 2nd century BCE for people struggling under the thumb of a foreign autocrat. Daniel's vision reveals God's promise to end suffering and restore justice in a new ruler, "As I watched, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. . . . The Ancient One gave him dominion and glory and kingship that shall not pass away or be destroyed."

The second reading comes from the Revelation to John, the only full-blown apocalypse in the New Testament. It was written in the 1st century CE for a marginalized and persecuted group of Christians. John's vision names Christ as the one coming to bring freedom and a new kingdom. "Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him. To him be glory and dominion forever and ever."

For many of us, we hear the word "apocalypse" and think of cataclysmic events like nuclear war or an alien invasion. But that's not the kind of apocalypse we're talking about. When it comes to scripture, an apocalypse is a vision, a revelation that lifts the cover of something to disclose what has been concealed. These visions are usually of divine mysteries that offer insight into how the universe works or the destiny of the world.[i] For the people who first heard them, it would have been like a splash of cold water, a reset, to be reminded that above and beyond the chaos of this world is God's will for justice, reconciliation, and wholeness.

For thousands of years, maybe since women and men could form the thought that goes with the feeling, we have also longed for that truth. The truth that grounds us in ultimate reality, the one is and who was and who is to come. The books of Daniel and Revelation use vivid imagery -- like the Ancient One on his thrown of fiery flames -- that was familiar to ancient readers but can ring hollow with us post-modern types.

Where do we see the longing for ultimate things, for transcendent truth, today? Where do we find the acknowledgement of God's presence and power?

At the beginning of November, my husband and I spent a week in Iceland. It's not so odd a thing to do -- the weather is similar to Seattle's. And it is so beautiful -- the volcanic geography, immense waterfalls, geothermal geysers, and powerful wind off the Atlantic Ocean have a way of stilling the mind and re-centering the heart.

We were there to attend a music festival in Reykjavik that showcases hundreds of bands from all over the world. It was also the week of the midterm elections, so in addition to immersing ourselves in music and the natural beauty, we followed the election results on our smart phones. We cared deeply about the outcomes, but also took heart in the creativity and passion all around us. It was good to feel that balance -- it gave some perspective.

My favorite artists were the Icelandic ones, like Ylja, Olafur Arnalds, and Junius Mayvant.

I'm no expert, but I hear a distinctive sound in Icelandic music that goes beyond genre or instruments. To me, it seems like the song of the earth's volcanic expansion, or the northern lights that pulse across the night sky, or the fierce wind that seems to come out of the deep. It is stirring, and calming, and grounding.

One night we went to hear the singer-songwriter Asgeir, whose sound is described as "ethereal melody and melancholic meditation."[ii] The show was in a 120-year-old Lutheran church in downtown Reykjavik. It was a simple space, with hard, wooden pews, bare walls and an elegant pulpit. Despite 10 other venues, the church was standing room only thirty minutes before the show. We were lucky to find seats in the back corner of the balcony. I couldn't see the musicians, but I could hear them, and I could see the faces of so many of the concert-goers in front of me.

There were people from all over the world, many languages, varied ages. Only a small fraction could understand the Icelandic words of the songs, but over the course of the hour, their bodies stilled and relaxed, many with faces tilted up and eyes closed. Their expressions reminded me of the unguarded and holy repose that I see on people's faces at communion. Throughout the space, there was a palpable sense of reverence, connection, and contemplation of ultimate things. The church held it all, as it had for generations.

The Feast of Christ the King asks bluntly, "What is your ultimate truth?"

While our ancestors turned to fiery, apocalyptic symbols of divine power to point to the answer, we live in a time where these images have been co-opted by video games and action films. Like our ancestors, though, we long to know and live out God's will for

justice, reconciliation, and wholeness. We long for Christ, the "name for the transcendent within every "thing" in the universe."[iii]

I wonder if a sense of this ultimate reality, of the transcendence of God, is found away from multi-sensory images -- in quiet, and stillness, and open listening. That is the invitation of Advent, which begins next Sunday. Today is the last day of the church year, and we begin again next week, when we enter the season of quiet, and stillness, and waiting.

So, come this evening to the Advent Event -- be reset in community and learn practices that will open space in your lives to receive the ultimate truth born among us at Christmas. I'll see you there.

---

[i] *New Interpreter's Study Bible*, 2212.
[ii] https://www.npr.org/2017/05/01/526314280/first-listen-sgeir-afterglow.
[iii] Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ*.

SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!