

MORE THAN YOU KNOW

November 25, 2018

Pentecost Last - Reign of Christ

[Revelation 1:7-8](#)

[John 18:33-37](#)

(prayer)

Today is the final Sunday in the liturgical, church year. Next week will be the fourth Sunday before Christmas day and therefore the first Sunday in the pre-christmas season of advent.

I know that we will soon be focusing on the baby Jesus in a manger, shepherds in a field and angels in the sky, wise men bearing gifts and the like.

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You may know that when it comes to reading about the birth of Jesus in the bible, only two books in the new testament bothered to give us any christmas details. And Matthew and Luke tell that story very differently.

It is one of my favorite bible study and preaching topics to compare and contrast Luke and Matthew's birth narratives.

But that is not the topic for today. It is actually a topic for December 16th at 9am before church: when I will be leading a one day only look at the *Birth of Jesus in the Bible*.

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As I said, it is not a topic for today, other than to say that, although the beginning of Jesus' life gets spotty attention in the gospel record, the end of Jesus' life is the central, significant focus of all four biblical gospels.

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Back in my summer bible camp days, I used to run a program called "an upside down story" that discussed how - the genesis of the new testament is the 'end of the story'. The earliest christian texts focused on the impact of Jesus' resurrection. The Christian story starts at the end. As the years progressed after Jesus' lifetime, the further back in the story the narrative evolved.

From the resurrection, we move back into Jesus' death; then his arrest (fully one-third of the gospels are dedicated to Jesus' final week). Over time, Jesus' years of active ministry get some attention. Mark, the first gospel to find written form, begins with Jesus' baptism and the calling of his first disciples.

Then, in the case of Matthew and Luke (each written a few years after Mark), the timeline moves back to Jesus' birth.

And then, a few decades later, when John was finally written, the story starts back before creation itself: *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

As I mentioned earlier, what is similar and what is different between how the four gospels tell the story of Jesus is one of my favorite conversations to have. Curious similarities and interesting differences can raise some pretty intriguing questions.

Biblical scholars refer to issues of why Matthew, Mark and Luke are so similar as [The Synoptic Problem](#); and why John is so different from the other three as [The Johanne Problem](#).

It is the stuff of fun bible study!

(PLUG: December 16 - 9am)

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The truth is that there are very few instances in the new testament when all four gospels tell the same thing in the same way.

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So when they do, it warrants close attention!

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And so, it is significant that, after his arrest, *all four* biblical gospels mention that Jesus was taken to stand trial before the Prefect of the Roman province of Judaea, *Pontius Pilate*. Non-biblical historical records tell us that Pilate served under Emperor Tiberius from the years 26 to 36; which is how we have an idea of about when Jesus was crucified.

Being tried before the local prefect is remarkable enough, but the similar accounts of Pilate's opening question is really interesting within the Jesus-story.

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ALL four gospels record that Pontius Pilate asked Jesus of Nazareth: "*Are you the King of the Jews?*" - [Mark 15:2](#); [Matthew 27:11](#); [Luke 23:3](#); [John 18:33](#).

Although some of the gospel accounts make mention of a religious opposition to Jesus from within the temple hierarchy, none of that was of concern to Pilate – whose only interest in the temple was how its leaders could help him maintain peace among the locals.

"*Are you the King of the Jews?*" not "*are you the son of god*" was Pilate's question.

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In the synoptic gospels (Mt, Mk, Lk), when king language is used, it is often the subject of a story-with-a-lesson (parable) told by Jesus: *The Kingdom of Heaven/God is like...*

This is far less common in John (which only has a couple of mentions of *the Kingdom of God*). In the fourth gospel, Jesus' teachings often take the form of "I Am" statements: *I am the bread of life; I am the true vine; etc.*

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Outside of the trial before Pilate, **Mark** and **Luke** never refer to Jesus as a king; and Matthew and John do it only twice each - **Matthew**: wise men looking for a king of the Jews, *and* quoting the prophet Zechariah as part of the Palm Sunday story (your king comes riding on a donkey); **John**: the same Palm Sunday quote *and* (early in the gospel) when a new disciple, Nathaniel, calls Jesus "the King of Israel".

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But... once Jesus is arrested, he is connected to the title "king" almost two dozens times in the gospel texts:

- Matthew: 4 times
- Mark: 6 times
- Luke: 3 times
- John: 9 times

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One of the things that *this* tells us is that Pilate's (aka Rome's) concern about Jesus was political, not religious.

Certainly, some in the pharisaic and sadducee circles were bothered by Jesus' religious opinions, the nature of his teachings, and how Jesus interpreted a religious perspective on societal norms. But none of that interested Pilate.

The Prefect needed to gauge how much of a political threat Jesus and his followers were to public order and the empires control of Judea. If the carpenter-teacher from Nazareth had regal aspirations or if he was a revolutionary figurehead for a group of insurgents, Pilate would have to react! I mean

you can't just walk around the Roman Empire claiming to be a king. Emperor Tiberius was the one and true ruler: that point had to be made clear. Maybe Jesus needed to be made an example of to send a clear message to any potential revolutionaries.

“Are you the King of the Jews?”

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In the end, it seems that Pilate did not see Jesus as a significant threat. Yes, there was a political dimension to his teachings: Jesus was a social prophet who challenged systems of power and customs of inequity. But Pilate did not view Jesus as promoting the violent overthrow of the roman occupation.

By his own admission, Jesus did not seem all that interested in having Pilate's or even Tiberius' job: *My kingdom is not from this world.*

Even so, corrupting followers with seditious thoughts could lead to problems down the road. And so, Pilate found Jesus guilty of treason against the empire. He was sentenced to death – by crucifixion (a favoured practice of the romans: the agonizing, slow suffocation brought on by forcing tired and beaten prisoners to hold their arms up and outstretched by nailing or tying them to a cross beam).

As a warning to on-lookers, Jesus' crime (*treason*) was the reason Pilate had listed on the sign put on the cross: “Jesus of Nazareth: King of the Jews”.

As has been the case throughout human history, public executions were as much a message to the wider population as it was as a punishment for criminals.

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As a non-violent pseudo-revolutionary, Pilate did not need to round up and execute the whole of Jesus' group; Pilate's experience told him that cutting off the head should send the desired deterrent message to the masses and bring an end to the *Jesus-is-the-King-of-the-Jews* movement.

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In retrospect, the testimony of the gospel writers is that Pilate's assumption was wrong – Jesus' death was not the end of the story.

The apostle Paul had come to the same conclusion as he wrote in a letter to the Corinthians (teaching on Jesus' resurrection):

Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?

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Jesus may have not met Pontius Pilate's definition of a king, but, for his followers and the early Christian converts, Jesus was the *Messiah of God* – a word that has kingly overtones. Messiah (hebrew) / Christ (greek) literally means *anointed* – referring to the ancient Hebrew practice of anointing the head of a king with ceremonial oil as part of a coronation ritual.

Jesus' death is not the end of the Christian story. Executing Jesus of Nazareth for being hailed as the *king of the jews* did not halt new generations of post-easter followers from proclaiming him as *Christ Jesus*.

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Pilate did not 'get' this. He couldn't see power and sovereignty in any way beyond the *pax romana* – the roman peace (through might).

John's gospel hints that (in that moment) Jesus might even have noticed that Pilate's perspective was limited, by trolling the prefect by answering his question with a question:

‘Are you the King of the Jews?’

‘Do you ask this on your own,

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or did others tell you about me?'

There was more to Jesus than Pilate seemed capable of knowing.

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Pilate couldn't understand the nature of Jesus' kingship because it did not follow the style of the pax romana. The pax christos was not peace through might, but peace through compassion.

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At the start of this month, I mentioned that "kingdom" language, in our modern, democratic context, this language is a bit archaic. Kingdom language is patriarchal, even sexist (where is talk of queendoms?).

Because of the inherent sexism and hierarchal patriarchy, in my preaching and teaching ministry, I am **not** a frequent user of kingdom language or metaphors.

However, in spite of its drawbacks, *kingdom* language serves a valuable purpose in understanding the nature of Jesus' ministry, why Pilate ordered his execution, and why the early Christian movement did not die when Jesus breathed his last breath.

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By teaching about the Kingdom of God, Jesus was professing a subversive doctrine to the people of Galilee and Judea:

Yahweh-God is your true sovereign, not Ceasar.

Jesus is God's Messiah not matter what Tiberius' Judean Prefect says.

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The Reign of Christ takes hold when we behave as if God holds authority in our lives.

In the language of the United Church Creed, the Reign of Christ takes hold when we believe that *we are not alone, that we live in God's world.*

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The Reign of Christ takes hold when we do as Jesus suggested to Pilate that his followers would do: we witness to the truth: a truth that peace emerges through compassion not through intimidation. Creation that is renewed and restored through a faith in harmony and not through a fear of violence.

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Pilate had the power to quash a violent uprising, but the prefect (nor his empire) would quell a revolution of the heart, mind and spirit.

Pilate could control his corner of this world's kingdom, but Jesus' kingdom was (and is) not *that* world.

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The kingdom of god is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in a field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a mighty tree.

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The world will witness the truth of Jesus' compassion-based peace **bit by bit**, through us... the followers of Jesus' Way.

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Let us pray:

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Holy God, your reign weds justice and love, grace and truth, wisdom and compassion. Help us to listen for your voice so that we can bear witness to your realm. Amen.

#122VU “All Glory Laud and Honour”

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