

Living Legacy
Reign of Christ Sunday
November 22, 2009
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Texts: 2 Samuel 23.1-7,
 Psalm 132.1-12,
 Revelation 1.4b-8,
 John 18.33-37

Maybe it's modern politics that has made me more cynical than I want to be. But the first couple of times I read through this passage from 2 Samuel I kept hearing the machinery of political pundits who begin talking about a president's legacy before they even reach their final year in office. You almost get the impression that modern Presidents spend their last 18 months in office more concerned with how history will view them than they are concerned with the business of leading a nation. I suppose it's inevitable when you are in that frame of mind to overstate your accomplishments and to minimize your failures.

At first blush, this text today from 2 Samuel seems to do that. Everything from the opening description of David as God's favorite to the rhetorical question asking whether or not David's reign has been like the light of the morning – you get the impression that David is mostly concerned with how he will be remembered. If you were present for worship this summer as we read through the cycle of stories about David you have to wonder what kind of amnesia has taken hold for the author to characterize his life and his reign in that way given all the things that David has done. As I say, my first impression was rather cynical!

But on the third reading, I realized that David is speaking at the close of his life. These are his final words. And he speaks them with the wisdom born from all that experience we read about this summer. In fact he speaks in a prophet's voice giving testimony to the Word of God as it is has been revealed to him. Even if he does have a very human concern for how history will view his monarchy, what he says here in his final words reflects the truth. When he looks back on his reign he realizes that what

God has said all along is true. It was only when David ruled over people justly, it was only when he lived his life in the reverence and awe of God, that it could be said that his reign was like the light of the morning, like the sun rising on the cloudless day. The one who rules justly...Can you hear the echoes from Hannah's song from last week in David's prophecy here?¹

David is concerned with the legacy he will leave behind. But the legacy is not with the line of David and **who** will sit upon the throne. The legacy is the ways of God and **how** they will reign as they sit upon the throne. The power that David is concerned with is not only political power. It's the life-giving power that flows through us as we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God². These are the prophet Micah's words but they are a good summary of the prophecy of David from today.

In that sense, Jesus stands in this line of David not as an heir to sit on his throne as the king of Israel but as one who is a living legacy of these ways of God spoken of by David and by Hannah before him. So we move to the gospel of John today. In this passage Pilate puts a question to Jesus when he is on trial at the end of his life: are you the king of the Jews? It's a political question. If Jesus is the king and intends to reign on the throne of David then he is a threat to Pilate's position and power. In case Jesus had any doubts about that power, Pilate will remind him that the fate of Jesus' life and death resides in Pilate's hands. Jesus does not shrink back in fear but responds with remarkable clarity and calm: "My kingdom is not from here....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."

Today is the culmination of the church year, a day we call the Reign of Christ Sunday. A new year of the church calendar opens as we move into the season of Advent next week. On this new year's eve of the church year, the same theme is placed before us. In a world that seems to be careening out of control, in a world where corruption and brokenness seem to rule the day we say that the Reign of Christ (the ways of God) will have the final word. We celebrate today that this world belongs to God.

¹ Last Sunday's lectionary had us reading the song of Hannah found in 1 Samuel 2.1-10.

² From Micah 6.8

These texts from 2 Samuel and John invite us to explore what we mean by the reign of Christ. Where does this power come from? Where do we see it moving in the world today? Jesus said that his power comes from the truth. He came to testify to the truth. Walter Brueggemann once said: “The truth evidenced in Jesus is not an idea, not a concept, not a formulation, not a fact. It is rather a way of being in the world in suffering and hope, so radical and so raw that we can scarcely entertain it.”³ Jesus said that everyone who belongs to the truth listens to his voice. When you listen to Jesus’ voice as it has been passed on to us through the gospels it is very clear that truth is something you live more than it is something you profess. It’s not so much about thinking the right thoughts and believing the right doctrines as it is about loving and living in the right ways. David in his final words realized that it was only when he ruled justly that he embodied the reign of God.

The reign of Christ is revealed every time we listen to the truth and the reign of Christ is present everywhere that truth is lived. I ran across the phrase *practitioners of truth*⁴ in a prayer this week. I thought what a wonderful way to describe what Jesus teaches about truth! We are to be practitioners of truth; people who not only recognize the truth when we hear it but people who put the truth into practice. Where that happens we see the reign of Christ manifest among us.

I was forwarded an email from a member of our church last week about a new initiative that began on November 12th called the Charter of Compassion. It’s a new movement started by the author Karen Armstrong in partnership with Desmond Tutu and thirty other religious leaders. It calls on people all over the world from all faiths and walks of life to join them in making a commitment to compassion. The charter says these words: “Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honor the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice,

³ Quote from Walter Brueggemann comes from an online commentary written by Kate Huey entitled *A Wise Reign* published on the United Church of Christ weekly Bible Forum.

⁴ Brueggemann, Walter. *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), pg. 129.

equity and respect....We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world."⁵ In just over one week since the web site launched almost 20,000 people have signed. Those of us who signed are urged not just to put our name to this concept and idea but to pledge our life to embody the principles described here. They want you to tell your story. People are beginning to post acts of compassion they have witnessed or participated in.

There is something vitally important about this kind of communal connection with other practitioners of truth. It not only motivates us to stay the course but it creates a kind of synergy. It provides an opportunity for the Spirit of Christ to move among us to generate energy that can spark new ideas and inspire new connections.

I heard some of you who participated in the small group this fall, *Praying our Goodbyes*, describe your experience. Not any detail of what was said there but more about what it was like to be part of that group. There is something powerful that happens when we tell the truth of our life to one another. When you belong to a group where people moving through their grief are willing to be honest about their pain and to give witness to their hope, you can feel the Reign of Christ gaining ground as you share in those holy moments.

I know I felt the Reign of Christ present last Saturday morning in our commons during the multicultural open house. Thank you to those who came and those who made that event possible. We had seven agencies from the Holland community who most definitely testify to the truth as they do their work among us. They testify to the truth that there is only one race among us and that is the human race. And all of us, no matter what our ethnicity or culture, the color of our skin, or the language we may speak, all of us together are citizens of God's world who deserve the dignity, the respect and the opportunities that belong to the children of God. I could go on....

⁵ See the website <http://charterforcompassion.org>.

I want to be clear: bringing about the reign of Christ is the work of God's Spirit in the world. But we get invited into that work in so many different ways and in so many different places. As we come to recognize the voice of Christ, wherever we hear it, as the very Truth of God...as we train our eyes to watch for it and as we tune our ears and our hearts to listen for that Truth, we begin to see that the reign of Christ is here and there are places where it is gaining ground.

Those are the places where we need to be.

“For this (Jesus said) I was born, for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”